

Muscle, Bone, and Back Injuries¹

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When a farm worker remains motionless in an overstretched or physiologically unsuitable position for extended periods musculoskeletal problems may occur. Ailments such as milker's knee or housemaid's knee develop when injuries or friction occurs continuously to the extremities, or there is constant pressure on a certain joint, bone or group of bones.

Injuries resulting from overexertion while lifting, pushing and pulling, are among the most frequent types of farm related injuries. These kind of injuries, along with accidental slips, trips and falls can result in sprains, strains, hernias and lower back pain.

Next to headaches medical experts note that back problems are the most common medical complaint. Back pains are also found to be second only to the common cold as the greatest cause of lost workdays. Back injuries alone cost American industry \$10-14 billion in workers compensation costs and about 100-million lost workdays annually.

What causes back problems? If ligaments and muscles are weak then discs in the lower back can become weakened. With excessive lifting, or a sudden fall a disc can rupture. Years of back abuse, or with aging, the discs may simply wear out and you may live with chronic pain for several years. However, back pain caused by a muscle strain or a ligament sprain will normally heal within a short time and may never cause further problems.

Poor physical condition, poor posture, lack of exercise, and excessive body weight contribute to the

number and severity of sprains and strains. Degeneration of the spine, due to aging, is also a major contributor to lower back pain, but it is often misdiagnosed as a sprain or strain.

Only a small percentage of all serious back injuries are true sprains, strains or fractures. Most are the result of degeneration of the spine caused by aging and abuse. Most back-injuries, however, occur in the 24 to 40 year old age group.

Back injuries can be reduced by better physical conditioning, resulting in stronger muscles to hold the spine in proper posture and less body weight for the back to support. Doing farm work or work around the house or yard you should try to maintain proper posture. Prolonged sitting or standing, particularly in forward, bent or slouched positions, can cause muscle fatigue, which can lead to leg and back problems. Attempting to lift or otherwise physically move one heavy object, or repetitive moves of even light weight objects, are other causes of sprains and strains as are slips, trips, falls and jumps.

One way to reduce back problems is modifying your work practices. Instead of lifting objects consider mechanical means. Heavy items may be moved with forks or bucket on a tractor.

Changing the size, shape and weight of containers or other materials you carry may also help reduce back problems. This has already been done by many companies that supply materials to farmers. For example,

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feed, seed and fertilizer bags in the 80- or 100-pound size are no longer common.

Ways to modify work practices so you will remain strong and healthy:

1. Lift objects carefully not in the quickest or easiest way.
2. Lift, push and pull with your legs, not your arms or back.
3. When changing direction while moving something, turn with your feet, not your waist.
4. Sit in your farm vehicles or family car as you sit in a chair, with your knees slightly above your hips. Also, provide support for your lower back.
5. When walking maintain a straight posture and wear slip-resistant, supportive shoes.
6. When carrying heavy objects, carry them close to you and avoid carrying them in one hand.
7. When stepping down from a tractor, combine or load of hay, step down backward, not forward.