



# ERGO BULLETIN

## Back Belts in the Workplace

*According to the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics, back injuries account for approximately 20 percent of all workplace injuries and illnesses in the United States.*

Back pain is second only to the common cold for reasons as to why an employee will call out of work. With the sheer volume of back issues impacting workers, both organizations and individuals have sought different ways to prevent back injuries. So do back belts present as an effective ergonomic control in today's workplace?

- **Are back belts considered personal protective equipment (PPE)?** NIOSH has openly stated that there is not enough clear scientific data to support the recommendation of back belts for individuals with no history of back injury. They have also gone on record to say that back belts should not be considered PPE.
- **Do back belts reduce loads on the spine?** According to NIOSH, there is little evidence to suggest that back belts can significantly reduce loads placed on the spine while lifting. A person lifting from the waist will be exposed to compressive forces within the lumbar joints that could have an impact on disc health. This internal pressure will be present regardless of whether or not a belt or brace is worn on the exterior of the body.
- **Do back belts increase intra-abdominal pressure (IAP)?** There is some thought that if the pressure within the abdomen were to be increased during lifting, it would help to counterbalance any additional strain placed on the spine. However, studies on this relationship are inconclusive and there is currently no proof that such a relationship exists.
- **Do back belts remind employees to lift properly?** Unless an organization has also invested in training employees, there is little evidence out there that support belts alone will be enough to ensure employees lift properly. Employees should be trained on basic ergonomic principles that could impact their work environment and also on how to effectively utilize ergonomic controls and proper body mechanics to help to reduce injury risk during physical tasks.



- **Could back belt use enhance the potential for injury while lifting?** There is some thought that individuals using back belts may experience a false sense of security and potentially engage in risky lifting behaviors, such as lifting more weight than they would be able to without a belt on.

**Final Thoughts:** A great deal of the supposed claims for using belts in the workplace are unsupported. There appears to be more harm than good that can come from issuing belts without formally training employees on ergonomics and proper body mechanics.

If employees bring in their worn belts to use in the workplace, it should be explained that there is no evidence that supports belt use can prevent injuries in a person with no injury history. Better controls for any industry would include developing an ergonomics program, adjusting the workplace to better fit employees, and offer ergonomic training.



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