

## HR and Employment Law News

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### Want to cut healthcare costs? Help employees avoid back surgery

By Winifred Bragg, M.D., Author of *KnockOutPain® Secrets to Maintain a Healthy Back*

About 60% to 80% of the adult U.S. population has low back pain, according to the [University of Maryland Medical Center](#), with billions of dollars being spent annually on workers' comp and [back pain injuries](#). In fact, back pain is the leading cause of long-term disability.

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Back pain not only takes a toll on the quality of employees' lives, but also impacts their productivity at work. Almost one in four employees report experiencing low-back pain, costing employers \$51,400 annually per 100 employees in lost productivity and medical treatments.

What's more, lost work time and underperformance at work (presenteeism) due to low-back pain costs employers \$34,600 per 100 workers. Employees with back pain are absent 4 more days per year than workers without back pain, and have the equivalent of 4.4 more days of presenteeism annually. The cost of low work time and presenteeism comprises more than two-thirds of the total cost of low-back pain to employers.

*While back pain is one of the most frequent reasons people seek healthcare, only 5% actually require surgery.*



What can be done to reverse this cost trend? HR professionals should take proactive steps to educate employees about viable nonsurgical options. This will also help to reduce costs associated with insurance premiums, absenteeism, lost productivity, and disability. More importantly, this will enable employees to incorporate daily routines that will help them maintain a healthy back. Preventive care is the key.

Here's a look at a few back health tips that can make a significant difference in the lives of employees—and the bottom line—when integrated into the work day.

## Tips for avoiding back pain

Using bad posture and poor body mechanics while performing daily activities can cause back pain. Lifting a heavy object without bending at the knees, for example, places the greatest load on the lower back, and poses the highest risk of injury. Using proper lifting techniques and correct posture are critical to prevent back injury. In fact, lifting a load properly is more important than the weight of the load.

*Individuals should avoid lifting from a twisted or sideways position or from a forward, stooped, or imbalanced position.*

Prolonged standing or sitting can cause the muscles that support the spine to tighten, which also leads to back pain. After 1 to 2 hours, individuals should take a postural break. While sitting at a desk or at home on the sofa, it's important to use good body mechanics at all times.

*For desk work, it can be a smart investment to provide ergonomically enhanced chairs for employees.* Look for a chair that has adjustable lumbar support, or use a lumbar roll, or rolled up towel placed behind the lower back.

It's also important that armrests are positioned to support the weight of arms. They shouldn't be too high, causing people to hunch, or low enough to force the arms to extend too far. Likewise, footrests should be positioned so that the knees are bent comfortably and level with the hips.

Despite all of this, sitting in the "correct" position for long periods of time will eventually become uncomfortable. So, it's wise to take a break every 2 hours: get up, move around, and stretch. This reduces stress on the spine and helps prevent muscle fatigue and stiffness.

## 3 tips to reduce back pain at work

Many people want to know: How can I do my job when I have back pain? Are there exercises I can do at work to relieve my back pain? Let's examine the steps that employees can take to help reduce back pain at work:

- 1. Strive to keep an ideal weight.** Obesity alone does not cause back pain, but being overweight increases the risk of back pain. Performing isometrics, such as tightening the muscles of the buttocks and legs while sitting, is an easy way to burn extra calories and maintain a healthy weight.
- 2. Walk 10,000 steps per day.** With the help of a pedometer, people can improve their cardiovascular status, lose weight, and therefore reduce their risk of low back pain. Here are some easy "steps" to take: park farther away from the office to increase steps, and take the stairs instead of the elevator. Extra steps today can add up, and make it easier for individuals to meet their health goals.
- 3. Perform extension exercises.** Most people spend a great deal of time flexing their backs when performing activities like brushing their teeth, putting on clothes, and getting files out of a cabinet. These flexion activities need to be counteracted with extension exercises while at work.

Extension exercises can easily be done by standing with hands on the hips and bending backward. Employees can stand at their desk and do a set of 10 a couple of times throughout the day, or during a break. People with lumbar or spinal stenosis, however, should avoid this stretching exercise.

Ultimately, these exercises, combined with a thoughtful approach to posture and sitting, can help reduce the risk of back pain. *Note:* Before beginning any exercise program, individuals should check

with their physician first.

Finally, HR professionals are well positioned to help employees understand that unnecessary surgeries can do more harm than good. Taking steps to increase the health of your workforce and reduce back pain benefits employees as individuals and the company as a whole. Healthy workers are more productive, happier, and less costly in terms of healthcare expenses.

**Winifred Bragg, M.D., FAAPMR, Diplomate, Pain Medicine, author, [KnockOutPain®](#) *Secrets to Maintain a Healthy Back***, is an expert in providing nonsurgical treatment for injuries and pain resulting from spinal and orthopedic conditions. She has been featured in numerous broadcast and print media outlets, including ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX, *Redbook*, *Women's World*, and *Self* magazine. Connect with Winifred on [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#). For more information on back safety, visit the [KnockOutPain website](#).