

Nursing Homes

QUESTION: I work as a CNA in a nursing home. Last week I wrenched my back helping to lift a resident. I went to the doctor and it is somewhat better now. If it gets worse, can I get workers' comp? How do I avoid getting hurt again?

ANSWER: Back injuries are covered under workers' compensation. According to OSHA, shoulder and back injuries caused over 36 percent of injuries involving missed workdays in 2001 mostly from overexertion and cumulative trauma.

Nursing homes have a high rate of back injuries. This is often from moving or transferring patients. Sometimes managers or even patients do not like mechanical lift equipment. However, that is not a reason to put employee safety at risk. Lifting loads heavier than about 50 pounds increases the risk of injury so it is very important to use lifting assistance devices.

Workplace lifting may also cause muscle pulls and sprains, wrist injuries, elbow injuries and spinal injuries.

Even if your back is somewhat better now, it is best to have your doctor monitor your condition. Further lifting may reinjure or worsen your back pain. Also, sometimes a back injury leads to pain that lasts several months or there may be a more serious injury where pain medication masks the need for further treatment.

Here are some ways to avoid back injuries in the future:

- **Avoid Repetition.** The longer you hold an item, even if it is light, the larger the risk of back and shoulder injury. Repeated exertion fatigues muscles.
- **Avoid Awkward Postures.** Bending while lifting forces the back to support the weight of the upper body in addition to the weight being lifted, which increases stress on the lower spine and fatigues muscles. Carrying loads on one shoulder, under an arm or in one hand creates uneven spinal pressure.
- **Remember Lifting Basics**
 1. **Hug the spine.**
 2. **Bend the knees.**
 3. **Don't bend over.**
 4. **Keep legs a proper width apart.**
 5. **Avoid twisting.**
 6. **Use lifting assistance devices and back support belts.**