

Farm safety - manual handling

Farmers and farm workers are commonly affected by muscle and ligament strains. Lifting a heavy load the wrong way, sudden jolts or even bad posture over a period of time can injure soft tissue, particularly the muscles of the back. Good posture and safe working habits can prevent most injuries. Keep a record of injuries to pinpoint areas to improve. Regularly talk with your family and other workers about how to further improve manual handling practices and reduce any risks.

General tips for preventing back injury

Ways to reduce back pain and prevent injury include:

- Warm up cold muscles thoroughly before engaging in any manual work.
- Lift and carry heavy loads correctly, by keeping the load close to the body and lifting with your thigh muscles.
- Get help to lift or carry a heavy load whenever possible, using another worker or appropriate mechanical aids.
- Organise your work area to reduce the amount of bending, twisting and stretching required.
- Maintain correct posture.
- Take frequent breaks.
- Cool down after heavy work with gentle, sustained stretches.
- Exercise regularly to strengthen muscles and ligaments.
- Lose any excess body fat.
- Be aware that mattresses that are too hard or too soft can contribute to back ache.

Lifting heavy loads

General suggestions for lifting heavy loads include:

- When carting hay, use mechanical aids to help lift and stack the bales.
- Whenever possible, use wheelbarrows, trolleys, conveyors and other equipment to move heavy loads.
- Ask someone for help if you have to move a heavy load by hand.
- Wear supportive back braces.
- If possible, repack the heavy load so that you have a collection of smaller, lighter loads.

Handling animals

Lifting animals like pigs or sheep commonly causes back injuries. Get help to lift or carry an animal if you can. Make use of mechanical aids, or change the design of your yard (for example, install drafting and drop gates) to minimise the need to lift. If you have to lift the animal alone, suggestions include:

- Face the animal away from you.
- Sit it back on its haunches.
- Squat down behind the animal.
- Take hold of its back legs.
- Tip the animal back against your body.
- Make sure the animal can't turn its head and face you.
- Keeping your back straight, lift with your thigh muscles.
- Use back braces or harnesses for added support.
- Work from the same side of the fence as the animal, rather than attempting to drag it over from the other side.

Training and supervision

Inexperienced or unfit workers are much more likely to injure themselves. Make sure your workers are thoroughly trained and know how to perform their tasks safely. Encourage unfit workers to improve their health with exercise and good food. In the meantime, limit them to safer activities.

Treatment options

Many back conditions can be eased with treatments such as physiotherapy or chiropractic. Other possible treatments include rest, gentle exercise and medication.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Victorian WorkCover Authority Tel. (03) 9641 1555
- Victorian Farm Safety Alliance Tel. (03) 9207 5513
- Victorian Farm Safety Training Centre Tel. (03) 5334 3510
- In an emergency, always call 000 for an ambulance.

Things to remember

- Practising good posture and safe working habits can prevent most back injuries.
- Lift and carry heavy loads correctly, keeping the load close to your body and lifting with your thigh muscles.
- Inexperienced or unfit workers are much more likely to injure themselves.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

DHS - Rural Health

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