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## Farm safety - manual handling

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### Summary

- Arrange your workplace to minimise lifting, bending and twisting.
  - Practice good posture and safe working habits to 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.
  - Repetitive tasks (such as drenching) that involve bending, twisting or even light lifting can still result in injuries.
  - Organisations such as WorkSafe Victoria can offer valuable advice on improving health and safety on your farm.
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Farmers and farm workers are commonly affected by muscle and ligament strains. Lifting objects that are too heavy, twisting and bending while carrying a load, sudden jolts or even bad posture over a period of time can injure soft tissue and joints.

Injuries to joints, in particular the back, can have a major impact on your health and the day-to-day running of your farm. 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 improve manual-handling practices and reduce any risks.

Exercise your joints and muscles regularly to build up strength and see your doctor if you are stiff and sore. Remember, if you are sitting for a long time (for example, on tractors, or doing office work) you should get up to stretch and move regularly.

### General tips for preventing back injury on the farm

Ways to reduce back pain and prevent injury include:

- Warm up cold muscles thoroughly before engaging in any manual work. Ask your doctor, exercise physiologist, physiotherapist or a trainer for advice on safe stretching techniques to avoid further injury.
  - Organise your work area to reduce the amount of lifting, bending, twisting and stretching required.
  - Use mechanical aids or get help to lift and carry heavy loads whenever possible.
  - **Lift and carry heavy loads correctly.** Bend your knees rather than your back to pick up a load and lift with your thigh muscles. Keep the load close to your body.
  - Lift loads straight up. Avoid lifting while also twisting.
  - Maintain correct **posture**.
  - Take frequent breaks or break up repetitive tasks if possible.
  - Cool down after heavy work with gentle, sustained stretches. Follow your doctor or physical therapist's advice for safe stretching.
  - Exercise regularly to strengthen muscles and ligaments.
  - Maintain a healthy body weight to reduce stress on bones and muscles.
  - Be aware that mattresses that are too hard or too soft can contribute to back ache. Poorly designed or worn-out seating (in tractors or other large machinery) can also cause problems.
  - Climb down from tractor cabins and other large machinery, rather than jumping, to avoid jolting impacts on joints.
  - Wear appropriate footwear with support to minimise stress on joints and the spine. This is especially important if standing for extended periods or on hard surfaces such as stockyards.
  - Keep your muscles strong and fit.
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- If you are sedentary, make sure you get up and stretch.

### **Lifting heavy loads on the farm**

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 a supportive back brace.
- If possible, repack the heavy load so that you have a collection of smaller, lighter loads.

### **Handling animals on the farm**

Lifting animals like pigs, calves or sheep is a common cause of back injuries. Avoid lifting stock wherever possible. If you must lift or carry a heavy animal, use mechanical lifting aids or get help if you can.

If possible, change the design of your workplace to minimise the need to lift – for example, install drafting and drop gates in your yards, and hoists on the back of your vehicles.

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 a back brace or harness 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 of manual handling**

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.

Only allow a worker to perform a task when you are confident they can handle it safely. If you are working with children, ensure that they are not lifting weights that are too heavy.

### **Treatment for manual handling injuries**

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
- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000) for an ambulance
- **National Centre for Farmer Health – Farming Fit videos** Tel. (03) 5551 8533
- **WorkSafe Victoria** Tel. (03) 9641 1444 or 1800 136 089
- **Farmsafe Australia** Tel. (02) 6752 8218

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