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Back Injuries—Painful for the Injured Individual and Financially Burdensome for all Involved

Prevent injuries through controls, guidelines, and training

Some of the most costly workers' compensation claims are from back injuries. As you can see from the open claims in this newsletter, the injuries can be permanent, and the treatment and recovery can be lengthy.

In the AAHA Business Insurance Program, seven of the top ten open workers' compensation claims involve overexertion or strain in lifting. The Hartford has paid more than \$1 million on these seven claims to date. This is significant. Furthermore, many loss control experts estimate the actual cost of an average back injury (including the indirect costs to your practice) to be four times the amount your insurance carrier incurs. Consider the hidden costs such as lost production, additional paper work, and employee hiring/training and how these costs adversely affect the profitability and efficiency of your practice.

So, how can you avoid back injuries at your practice when everyone who lifts animals is at risk? Implement controls and provide your employees with training and lifting guidelines.

Implement Controls

The best way to prevent back injuries is to implement the use of mechanical lifting devices or to complete the process safely without lifting. The use of lifting devices should significantly reduce the risk of back injury. Although these types of devices are beneficial, they may not be appropriate in all instances. If appropriate, use carts to minimize back stress.

Personal protective equipment such as gloves or footwear should be considered when appropriate. In some cases, gloves may present more of a hazard by reducing the ability to grasp an object. Footwear with slip resistant soles and a wide base provide the best support; however, you should determine appropriate footwear on a case by case basis.

Also consider the use of back belts. Back belts reduce the muscle activity required to lift and increase the awareness of safe lifting practices. If back belts are used, training must be provided and periodically reinforced. Follow manufacturer guidelines.

Training

Here are five tips to implement training at your practice:

1. Explain the risk factors involved.



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2. Conduct hands-on demonstrations.
3. Include real-world situations in the training.
4. End the training session with a quiz or other test.
5. Periodically reinforce the training.

Ten Lifting Guidelines

1. Plan before you lift. Determine your route of travel and know where you will place the load before lifting the animal or object. If you have to step over objects or walk across slick surfaces, you may lose control.
2. Estimate the weight of the animal or object to be lifted and consider getting help if it's awkward or too heavy. A walk-through weight scale can be used to determine the weight of the animal prior to lifting. Also consider using a mechanical device. The time it takes to set-up and use the lifting device may be well worth it.
3. For a one-person lift, make sure you have a good grasp of the animal or object before you lift. If the animal becomes aggressive or kicks, consider other options. For a two-person lift, have one person give instructions for lifting, transporting, and setting the load down. Motions should be simultaneous.
4. Avoid lifting that begins below the knees and above the shoulders. These types of lifts can place additional stress on the musculoskeletal system.
5. When lifting, maintain good foot position and hold the animal or object close to the body. If practical, bend your knees (especially if the load is close to the ground) and keep your back as straight as possible. Ask yourself, "Does my body position feel right?" If not, don't lift and think of other alternatives.
6. Do not jerk the load when lifting and avoid twisting your back.
7. Avoid lengthy lifts.
8. When placing the load, keep the load close to your body and make sure there is sufficient room for the animal or object.
9. Maintain good physical condition. Strong abdominal muscles will help support your back.
10. Review these guidelines regularly.

Assistants, technicians, and veterinarians alike are at-risk for back injuries. Make it a priority at your practice to implement controls and provide training and lifting guidelines.



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