Editor's note: PASS ON EACH ISSUE OF THIS NEWSLETTER TO EVERYONE WITH SAFETY RESPONSIBILITIES AT YOUR COMPANY.

Preventing ergonomics-related injuries

Key Points

- According to the federal Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA), ergonomics is the science of fitting workplace conditions and job demands to the capabilities of the working population. Ergonomic risk factors are found in jobs requiring repetitive, forceful or prolonged exertions of the hands; frequent or heavy lifting, pushing, pulling or carrying of heavy objects; and prolonged awkward postures. Vibration and cold can add risk to these work conditions.
- Jobs in the landscaping industry typically encompass all of these tasks and risk factors. Common injuries include sprains to the back, neck, and shoulders and other musculoskeletal injuries — which involve soft tissue such as muscles, tendons, ligaments, joints, blood vessels, and nerves — from lifting sacks, bags, or vegetation and from using non-powered tools.
- According to the 2010 Liberty Mutual Workplace Safety Index, overexertion, which includes injuries related to lifting, pushing, pulling, holding, carrying, or throwing, was the leading cause of injuries in 2008, costing businesses $13.4 billion in direct costs — more than a quarter of overall costs.

Employers’ and supervisors’ checklist

✓ Stay compliant with regulations. Congress repealed a federal OSHA ergonomics standard soon after it went into effect in 2001, and under the Congressional Review Act, the agency is prohibited from issuing a rule that is substantially the same. However, OSHA cites for ergonomic hazards under the General Duty Clause, which requires you to keep your workplace free from recognized serious hazards. At least 24 states have adopted their own occupational safety and health standards and enforcement policies, and some have ergonomics rules. Check with your state agency to learn what additional regulations might apply.

✓ Determine whether your company’s workplace conditions are contributing to employees developing ergonomics-related injuries. Your workers’ compensation carrier should help you do this, at no cost in addition to your annual premium, by:
  - Reviewing injury/illness records and claims to find out if there is a pattern of ergonomics-related injuries in certain jobs or tasks.
  - Analyzing jobs or work tasks to identify potential ergonomic problems before injuries occur.
  - Seeking employee input about the existence of ergonomic problems.

✓ Provide manual and mechanical devices for lifting and carrying heavy loads. These devices can include dollies, hand trucks, forklifts and skid-steer loaders.

✓ Do not allow crew members to lift awkward loads or those weighing more than 50 pounds without assistance.

✓ Train workers in safe lifting practices (below) and in other ways to reduce their risk of ergonomic injuries.

✓ Almost every piece of landscape-maintenance equipment — trimmers, walk-behind mowers, blowers, riding mowers, etc. — has a constant vibration that can affect the hands and forearms and result in ergonomic injuries. Consider phasing out older equipment and replacing it with ergonomically friendly models. Many chain saws, line trimmers, brush cutters, shears, and blowers include anti-vibration systems and are ergonomically designed to reduce the likelihood of chronic medical problems.
✓ Provide employees with vibration-reducing gloves if the equipment they use doesn’t have an anti-vibration system.
✓ Make sure employees keep non-powered tools free of rust and the blades sharp.
✓ Ensure employees use the right type and size tool for the job.
✓ Rotate employees among different tasks and allow rest periods, including micro-breaks — 20- to 30-second pauses in which workers stop performing tasks and stretch. Encourage crew members to do this about every 15 minutes, especially if their tasks are repetitive.
✓ For a thorough list of landscaping tasks with ergonomic hazards and solutions, see the Washington State Landscaping Industry Ergonomics Demonstration Project, beginning on page 5.

Employee dos and don’ts

Do:

- Wear the shoulder harness or strap on line trimmers and other equipment. Adjust the strap to the best fit for you. These devices are designed to take pressure off your back and arm. When workers begin using them, they typically realize their pulled muscles and muscle fatigue have been caused by not wearing the strap.
- Wear gloves with vibration-reducing padding if the equipment you’re using doesn’t have an anti-vibration system.
- Do some stretches during scheduled breaks and during micro-breaks — 20- to 30-second pauses in which you stop performing tasks.
- Vary your body position while doing repetitive work.
- Properly lift and lower objects weighing 50 pounds or less:
  - Face the object, place your feet shoulder-width apart and make sure your footing is firm.
  - Ensure gloves fit correctly and get a good grip on the object.
  - Keep the load close to your body and directly in front of you. Keep your elbows, chin, and arms tucked in tight and your body weight directly over your feet.
  - Bend at your knees and lift with your legs while keeping your back as straight as possible. Lift or lower the object in a smooth, controlled motion. Avoid twisting.

Don’t:

- Lift loads higher than your chest or toss objects weighing more than 5 pounds.
- Lift awkward loads or those weighing more than 50 pounds by yourself.
- Reach forward, overhead, or behind your back when lifting or lowering objects. Twisting, reaching positions are most likely to cause injury.
- Remove the cutter guard from line trimmers. A device incorporated in the cutter guard keeps the line at the proper length. If the line is too long, engine rpm drops, causing the line trimmer to vibrate excessively.
- Use the wrong tool for the job. In addition to being dangerous and inefficient, this could put unnecessary strain on your body.
- Continue to work if you experience low-grade, localized back pain. Instead, rest your back to allow the muscles to heal, apply ice or heat to the area, and do gentle stretches. Back pain associated with landscaping work often results from lumbar strains and sprains in which muscles are inflamed or slightly injured through overuse or overextension. See a physician if pain persists longer than two days.