[IMAGE]

Do Back Belts Really Work?

Back belts have become a common sight - we see them every day on vending machine stockers, deliverymen, and anyone else who regularly lifts heavy objects. Back belts were originally touted as an effective means of preventing back problems, but since have been said to have no effect on proper lifting techniques, making it difficult to decide whether or not to use one. A recent study once again proves the usefulness of back belts, however.

The authors of the study evaluated the effects of an elastic back belt on spine motion when lifting large and small boxes of the same weight (about 20 lbs). Twenty-eight subjects with no prior low back pain and at least six months of manual-handling experience lifted small and large boxes with and without a back belt. The boxes were lifted from a position near the ground in front of the subjects to a position at table-height to the subject's right side.

Back belt use significantly reduced twisting of the spine when lifting large boxes. Back belts also clearly decreased spinal bending and speed of lifting when lifting both large and small boxes. Properly lifting while wearing a belt did not lead to proper lifting techniques once the belt was removed, indicating the importance of continued use.

This study supports prior research emphasizing the value of wearing back belts for manual lifting tasks; belts appear to result in slower lifts, proper squat-lift technique, and reduced torso motions. Whether or not you use a belt, always follow proper lifting techniques: lift with your legs, not with your back. If you ever need to lift moderate-to-heavy objects at work or at home, be sure to wear a back belt. It's a small price to pay, compared to costly and painful back injuries.

Reference:

Giorcelli RJ, Hughes RE, Wassell JT, et al. The effect of wearing a back belt on spine kinematics during asymmetric lifting of large and small boxes. *Spine*, August 15, 2001:26(16), pp. 1794-1798.

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