



Safety Up – On Lifting Techniques

Farm work can be a back-breaker – literally. Lifting, loading, bending, shovelling, pushing, pulling and hoisting are all tough physical jobs. The stress and strain can lead to muscle strains, torn ligaments and chronic back problems. In fact, estimates suggest nearly one third of all workers' compensation cases involve back injuries and improper lifting techniques are responsible for a large percentage of back injuries among farm workers. You can prevent back problems later on by learning to lift properly starting now.

The key is to: **know the job, know the hazard, and know the drill.** Knowing the job means getting trained ahead of time to ensure you can do your work safely. Once you're on the job, you need to be alert to recognize potential hazards that may put you or coworkers at risk. Finally, when you identify hazards, you need to know the drill – how will you safely manage or avoid them?

Lift and learn

Farm work is hard work. It can take its toll on your body – bones, muscles, tendons and ligaments. All that lifting, stretching and straining can lead to backaches, shoulder pain, problems in the arms or legs, even disabling physical conditions. The reality is that sprains and strains are more likely to happen if the body is used incorrectly. **Know the job.**

To use your body correctly, you must learn to lift without using your back. If a load is too awkward or heavy to lift alone, ask for help. Don't be a hero and end up hurt. Remember, it's a job, not a competition. Also, remember that just knowing how to lift heavy items isn't enough – you need to train and practise to do it well. Have you ever seen a really small person hauling heavy feed sacks with apparent ease? The secret lies in taking the proper stance and getting the right grip. Learn it. Your back will be forever grateful.

10 steps to safe handling

1. **Size up the load and check conditions.** Don't try to lift it alone if the load looks too heavy or awkward. Ensure there is enough space for movement, the footing is good and no obstacles are in your path. This preparation will help prevent you from tripping or stumbling.
2. **Be sure your balance is good.** Feet should be shoulder-width apart, with one foot beside and the other foot behind the object being lifted.
3. **Bend the knees; don't stoop.** Keep the back straight, but not vertical. (Tucking in your chin will straighten your back.)
4. **Grip the load with the palms of your hands** and your fingers. The palm grip is much more secure. Tuck your chin again to ensure your back is straight before you lift.

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5. **Use your body weight to start moving the load.** Allow the lifting action to come from the big, strong muscles in your legs, rather than the weaker muscles in your back.
6. **Keep your arms and elbows close** to your body while lifting.
7. **Carry the load close to your body.** Don't twist your body while carrying the load. To change direction, shift your foot position and turn your whole body.
8. **Watch** where you are going!
9. **To lower the object, bend the knees.** Don't stoop. Set the load down. If you are placing it on a bench or shelf, set it on the edge and then push it back into position. Make sure your hands and feet are clear when placing the load.
10. Make it a habit to follow this procedure when lifting anything, even a relatively light object.

Know the hazard. Here are some lifting hazards to watch out for on the farm:

- Lifting objects that weigh more than 10% to 15% of your body weight (anything heavier than 25 pounds probably fits this description).
- Lifting repeatedly, regardless of how heavy the object is.
- Awkward body posture while handling heavy objects.
- Working in an awkward position for a prolonged period of time.
- In addition to lifting, musculoskeletal physical stresses to watch out for include: forceful gripping, bending, twisting, kneeling, squatting and using vibrating equipment.
- Any prolonged activity, such as driving (especially if the equipment vibrates).
- Slips and falls.

Hazards of heavy lifting

Working on the farm involves many different tasks in a day. It's very easy to forget to take time to consciously think about the potential hazards of each new task before you start. When it comes to safe lifting, this is a very easy mistake to make. If you don't slow down and think about what you're doing, you might realize too late that you've just been throwing hundreds of pounds of hay bales with your lower back. Ouch!

Lower back pain is most often associated with manual lifting of heavy objects, a common requirement of farm work. If you find you're having low back pain, it may mean you need to revisit the steps to safe lifting, and practise to protect your back from further damage.

Team lifting

If the weight, shape, or size of an object makes it tough for one person to handle, team up. Workers should be close to the same size for team lifting. One worker should be responsible for control of the action to ensure proper coordination. Work together! Injuries can happen if one of you lifts too soon, shifts the load, or lowers it improperly.

DO

- Tuck in the chin to keep the back as straight as possible while lifting.
- Lift with the strong leg muscles.
- Ask for help with the heavy, awkward items.
- When possible, use mechanical equipment to move heavy items.

DON'T

- Use your back muscles to do lifting.
- Try to lift an item that is too heavy or awkward.
- Twist your body while carrying an object.
- Attempt team lifting without proper coordination.

Pain and strain prevention

Knowing how to avoid or manage identified hazards is the key to staying safe on the farm. You're young and capable, but you don't have to hurt yourself to prove it. When heavy work presents itself, find ways to get the job done in less dangerous ways.

Know the drill. To prevent damaging your body while you work:

- Use mechanical lifting equipment if it is available – loaders, forklifts and hoists were designed for this purpose.
- Plan your jobs to reduce the chance of injury.
- Keep reach to a minimum, and lift as close to your body as possible.
- Ask for help if the load feels too heavy.
- Always work in teams of two to lift objects heavier than 15% of your weight.
- Alternate lifting tasks with other jobs.
- Keep your body in good physical condition – maintain a fitness conditioning program.

The last word

It's up to you to take personal responsibility for your safety on the job. When you use proper methods to lift heavy objects, you protect yourself against injury and make your work easier. The key is to take the time to *think* about what you are going to do before you bend over to pick something up. Over time, safe lifting technique can become a healthy habit that will help your back last a lifetime.

References

Rural Ergonomics, Farm Safety 4 Just Kids, Earlham, IA, www.fs4jk.org

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Farm Safety Association Inc., Guelph, ON.