

Protecting Your Spine

No matter how hard you try, avoiding all the situations that may be stressful to your spine is impossible. However there are some techniques that can help to protect your body.

When lifting...

Use the squat lift

Position yourself over the object, with your feet about shoulder-width apart. Try to get the object between your legs, when possible, so that you don't have to reach out for it. Squat down, keeping your head up, shoulders back and spine erect. The bending should come only from your hips, knees and ankles. Get a good grip on the object and lift with your head up. Use your legs to lift. Keep the object close to your body. Set down the object using the same technique you used to lift it.

Use your abdominal muscles to help support your spine. Before your lift, think to pull your stomach tight and in.

Do not bend at the waist, but at the hips.

Use your legs whenever possible.

If you have to reach for an object... stick your buttocks out, bending at the hips.



Use the Golfer's Lift for Light Objects

The golfer's lift is perfect for picking up small objects off the floor without expending too much energy or straining your back. With this method, all you need is some support (a chair, a desk, or a putter) to put your hand on to take the load off of your back as you bend over.

Face the object you are going to lift, and place all of your body weight on one leg. Place the opposite hand on a support, and bend straight over from the hip; your weighted knee can bend slightly, too. Keep your head up and your spine erect in a straight line. As you bend, let the leg with no weight on it come off of the ground in line with the upper body. This leg acts as a counterbalance to the weight of the upper body, making it easier to come back up without using the muscles of the lower back, which don't have the leverage.

Besides objects on the floor, the golfer's lift works for other common situations. For example you might be lifting a bag of groceries out of your car boot. Place a hand on the edge of the car, bend from the hip, grab the bag with the other hand, and lift. Again, if you let the leg without the weight come off the ground a little, you will notice how easy it is to get back upright. To make it even easier, pull the bag closer to the back of the car before lifting. Your back will not even know it's working.

Never jerk or twist!

The worst thing you can do to your spine is to bend way over with your low back and then twist. A large rotational, or shear, force is placed on the facet joints and discs, which dramatically increases the stress to these tissues.

Always try to face your work. If you must turn, turn with your feet, not your body.

Push, Don't Pull

It is much safer to push an object than pull it. Remember to stand tall, lean into the object, use your legs and arms, keep your head up, and push.

When you push, you use the strength of your legs and your back to move the object; you can really get your weight behind it.

When you pull, the tendency is to stand flat-footed and to yank, relying solely on your back without using the leg muscles. Also, the back is often in a poor position when pulling, increasing the risk of strain.

When using Tools...

Use your leg muscles and bend slightly at your hips, knees and ankles. For example, when you shovel or rake, do not stand straight-legged with your back rounded over the tool.

Do not overreach. For example, when vacuuming or racking, take a step when you need to cover a broader area. Overreaching puts your spine in an awkward, twisted position. Use your feet more and your back less.

Alternate hands frequently so that you use different muscles and minimize the amount of constant twisting to one side.

Store Equipment in Back-Wise Locations

Give some thought to where you store things. Place your heaviest items at waist height. Also, your most frequently used items should be placed at this level so that you don't have to reach all the time. That leaves lighter and infrequently used objects in the lower and higher locations on the shelves.

With children... use a push chair /pram as often as possible. When lifting children, the same principles discussed above apply. If you have to carry a child on your hip, at least alternate sides.