

### Strains and Sprains

The tasks you do here at Northwestern, such as lifting, pushing, or pulling heavy items, reaching overhead, working in awkward body postures, performing tasks repetitively, and standing or sitting for a prolonged amount of time, can lead to strain and sprain injuries - which are among the most common causes of workplace injuries.

A strain injury is a stretched or torn muscle tendon, while a sprain injury is a stretched or torn ligament. These injuries commonly occur in the back, arms, and shoulders, and common symptoms include pain, swelling, stiffness, and weakness.

#### Treating a strain or sprain

If you believe you may have a strain and sprain injury at work, notify your supervisor and seek medical care. If the injury is serious, call 911 immediately. Typically, a minor strain and sprain injury may be treated by elevating the body part, resting, and applying ice, but you should always consult your medical care provider before administering self-treatment.

#### Did you know?

*Strains and sprains are the leading injuries here at Northwestern, with 26 reported in 2022, resulting in 465 days away from work requiring medical treatment and recovery.*

#### Tips for Success When Talking to Your Team

**Preparation is Key:** Keep the topic relevant to your work. Work with your team to review potential strain and sprain hazards in your work areas.

**Stay Positive:** Keep the focus on what can be done to create a safe workplace instead of focusing on what has gone wrong in the past.

**Share a Story, Ask for a Story:** Storytelling is a powerful method to convey information. Stories from your employees make the topic even more relatable.

#### Prevention

Below are some helpful tips to prevent strains and sprains in the workplace:

- Stay in good physical shape through regular exercise and stretching. An active lifestyle along with healthy habits, such as getting good sleep and eating right, will help to reduce your chance of injury.
- Take breaks and rotate tasks to allow your body to rest.
- If available and when feasible, use [material handling equipment](#), such as a pallet jack, dolly, cart, or forklift to avoid carrying loads.
- Ask for help when lifting heavy, awkward, and unstable loads.
- When carrying and lifting items, keep them close to your body, maintain good posture, and bend with your knees, not the back.
- Have a plan when carrying loads by inspecting your travel route.
- Use caution when walking on uneven and slippery surfaces to prevent a slip, trip, or fall.
- Select hand and power tools that fit your hand to reduce excessive gripping force or pressure.
- Use a ladder or step stool to avoid overreaching for items at heights.
- Review the [Tips on Ergonomics at Work](#) to learn how to set up your workstation desk and chair for optimal comfort.



**Learn more:** Complete [Back Injury Prevention](#), [Office Ergonomics](#), and [Industrial Ergonomics](#) online training.

**Report all injuries:** [Online](#) or call (847) 491-5582.

#### Safety at Home

Many at-home activities (e.g., yard work, sports, painting, moving furniture) can expose you and your family to strain and sprain injuries. Below are some tips to keep you and your family safe:

- ✓ When shoveling snow, use proper lifting techniques by keeping your back straight, lifting with your legs, and do not turn or twist your body.
- ✓ Adequate sleep is very important to your health. If you regularly wake up with pain or discomfort, your mattress or pillow may be the problem, and you should consult a professional or your medical care provider for guidance.
- ✓ Warm up and stretch prior to doing physical activities like playing sports, gardening, and doing at-home projects.

**For Additional Information** Contact Environmental Health and Safety at [ehs@northwestern.edu](mailto:ehs@northwestern.edu).

*Do you or your team have a safety story you'd like to share? Contact Environmental Health and Safety for details.*