

Do Back Belts Reduce Back Injuries?

Back strains among veterinary technicians and assistants may not be the most frequent type of injury (bites and scratches happen more often) but they can be the most serious, resulting in many lost workdays and high workers' compensation medical and indemnity claims costs. Some veterinary practices encourage the use of back belts to prevent these injuries, but the question persists, "Do back belts reduce back injuries?"

The answer to this question is not black and white. While back belts do indeed provide additional support to the lower back during heavy or strenuous tasks (such as lifting a large dog), they do not eliminate the risk. It is common practice for individuals who wear back belts to lift heavier items than they would normally consider lifting and to lift without using their legs. This false sense of protection may actually result in an increased risk of injury.

Do back belts weaken your core muscles?

Back belts act as an external stabilizer for your back during strenuous activities, and abdominal and core muscles, when engaged, act as an internal stabilizer for the lower back, reducing the risk of injury when lifting. When back belts are worn properly (tightened **only** during the strenuous part of an activity), the chances of the belt weakening your core muscles are minimal.

Do back belts improve posture and body mechanics?

It depends on the back support! Most back belts and supports have no effect on lumbar motion or posture. Some of the more rigid belts (especially those with the contoured lumbar insert) can alter movement patterns, thus improving lower back postures and body mechanics. Be warned, however, that the stresses can be transferred to other unsupported areas of the body (shoulders, neck, wrist) and may lead to increased risks of injury there.

Are back belts a good safety reminder?

Many believe that back belts are a good tool for increasing staff awareness during lifting, thereby reducing the likelihood of risky mechanics or behavior. It is good practice to remind employees that back belts do not make them stronger and they should not attempt to lift things they would not normally lift. Using sound

proper body mechanics, and attempting only those tasks within your physical capabilities, are the best ways to avoid injury.

Guidelines for Using a Back Belt

1. Practice proper body mechanics and posture when using a back belt.
2. Wear the belt whenever necessary, but as little as possible. Tighten it only during the strenuous part of an activity. For light tasks and breaks, loosen the belt.
3. Do not rely on the belt to increase lifting capabilities. Avoid the "Superman Syndrome."
4. Back belts should not replace physical conditioning practices. Good strength and flexibility help a back stay healthy!
5. Be sure the belt is properly sized, is comfortable, and is appropriate for the tasks being performed.

A back injury can have long term effects and in some cases, can be life changing. By using proper lifting techniques and using a back belt when appropriate, you can significantly reduce the chance of injury. ■

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