

# Flat on Your Back

BY ROBIN SUTTELL



COMSTOCK

Back pain and injuries are common in the industry, and you may be at risk for them. Here's how you can avoid them

**T**he gene pool gave Doug Sweeney a bad back. Common sense keeps him active at work and at home.

Sweeney, assistant superintendent at Grand Island Municipal GC in Grand Island, Neb., was born with six lower lumbar vertebrae, one more than normal. So were his brothers and his two children.

Normally, the extra vertebrae don't cause too many problems. In Sweeney's case, however, one didn't mature completely, leaving him with chronic pain in his hips and lower back.

"If you have never had back problems, I envy you," Sweeney says. "When your back goes out, you're helpless."

Sweeney, an almost 19-year veteran of the golf course industry, has spent a lifetime managing his condition. He regularly visits chiropractors and keeps up with therapeutic exercises. His efforts have paid off.

While his back does go out from time to time thanks to heredity, Sweeney has never been seriously injured on the job because he's vigilant about taking care of his back when lifting, pushing and even climbing on and off equipment.

"He's always reminding the other employees about back safety," says John Hadwick, Grand Island's certified superintendent.

Preventing back injuries is a major workplace safety challenge for superintendents and their staffs. A U.S. Department of Labor report reveals that in 2000 nearly 600,000 injuries — one-third of all work injuries — stemmed from repetitive motions or sprains and strains.

"Musculoskeletal conditions have reached epidemic proportions, costing the United States

\$254 billion annually,” says St. Louis-based orthopedic surgeon, Richard Gelberman, past president of the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons (AAOS).

No industry is immune, particularly in ones where physical labor makes up a key part of a worker's daily tasks.

At any given moment at any golf course across the country, chances are a worker is doing something on the job that puts his back in peril. Even simple lifting done improperly can take a worker out for weeks.

Ask Don Dodson, superintendent at Lakeview Golf Resort and Spa in Morgantown, W.Va. This past spring, a back injury affected his work force during a crucial time in the golfing season.

“I had a guy planting 1-gallon landscape containers, and he strained some muscles in his back,” Dodson recalls. “He was out for six weeks. Who would have thought a guy would have injured his back planting a 1-gallon container of perennials?”

Even the most innocuous tasks can cause a back injury, experts say. It all comes down to the way you lift something, how much you are lifting it and how frequently you are lifting it.

According to the AAOS you are at greatest risk for back pain if:

- Your job requires frequent bending and lifting.

- You must twist your body when lifting and carrying an object.

- You must lift and carry in a hurry.

- You are overweight.

- You do not exercise regularly or do not engage in recreational activities.

- You smoke.

But even if you don't fall into any of these categories, you can still fall prey to a back injury. Say you have a heavy piece of machinery or an extra-large, bulky bag of fertilizer to lift. Will you ask someone on your team for help? Chances are, you won't: You don't want to look like a sissy.

That's bad thinking, experts say. You might look like a he-man, but you could find yourself flat on your back for a month. It's hard to believe, but lifting even a lightweight, but awkwardly shaped object by yourself can throw your back out of whack.

“Don't take things for granted,” Sweeney warns. “Just because you feel great today and

*Continued on page 46*

## The Right and Wrong Ways of Lifting and Moving

Most back injuries result from poor lifting techniques. There are right ways and wrong ways to lift objects. The right way will keep you productive on the job. The wrong way could immobilize you on your back for a month or more.

Faced with several lost-time back injuries in different departments, the human resources department at Lakeview Golf Resort and Spa in Morgantown, W.Va., created a safe lifting list of tips for its staff:

### Safe lifting begins before you pick up the load

- Choose the flattest, straightest and clearest route, even if it is a little longer.
- Don't move any object that might cause you to trip.
- Look for places where you can stop and rest.
- Make sure that the unloading area is clear.
- Make sure the weight is stable and distributed evenly.
- Make sure there's nothing sharp or abrasive sticking out of the load.

### Safe lifting techniques

- Bend with the knees rather than with your back.
- Stand close to the load.
- Grip it firmly with your hands, not just your fingers.
- Bring the load close to your body for more power and less strain.
- Let your legs do the work.
- Make sure you can see.
- Don't twist your body.

### Two-person lifting techniques

(use this method when the object in question poses a threat of injury)

- Put one person in charge of saying when and where to move.
- Lift and rise at the same time.
- Keep the load at the same level while carrying it.
- Move smoothly together.
- Unload at the same time.

### Other lifting hints

- Warm up before you lift.
- Try to break a large load into several smaller ones.
- Wear safety shoes with reinforced toes and non-skid soles.
- Wear tight-fitting gloves to protect your hands and get a better grip.
- Avoid loose clothing that could get in your way.
- Try to load and unload at waist height.
- Don't overdo it. Know your limitations and get help if necessary.

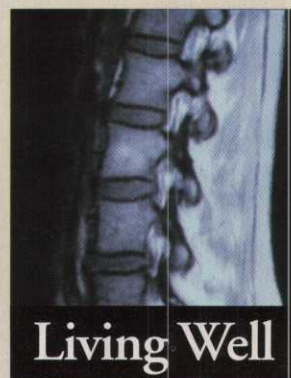
You might have to improvise a bit to find the best, safest method that suits you, medical experts say. Don't do something that feels unnatural, cautions Dr. Andrew Haig, associate professor of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation and Surgery at the University of Michigan.

“While it is true that some types of movement can strain or aggravate your back, that knowledge is often misinterpreted,” Haig says. “What the medical community now understands is that it is often better to tell our patients to do what feels right. Too often, people stiffen up and force their bodies to move unnaturally in an effort to be correct.”

Haig says trying too hard to be “correct” sometimes can override a natural sense of what is physically comfortable. This, too, can result in injury.

“Sometimes the best advice we can give is as simple as, ‘Do what feels right, and if it hurts, don't do it,’” he says.

— Robin Suttell



Living Well

PART 3 BACK INJURIES

DIGITAL STOCK

## Flat on Your Back

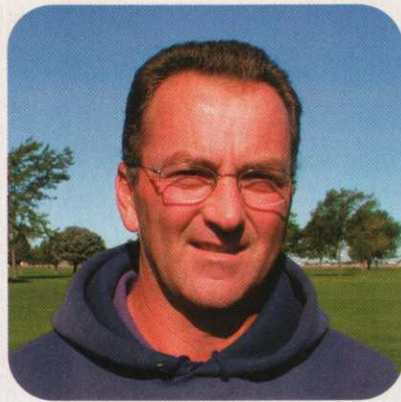
Continued from page 45

think you can pick up something without help, it doesn't mean that you should."

Education, prevention and common sense go a long way to keeping a maintenance staff healthy and on the job. The GCSAA offers a number of safety training materials that include information on back injury prevention. Also check with your course's human resources department, if it has one. It likely can provide training materials, too.

The HR department at Lakeview takes worker health and safety seriously, particularly after several members of the resort's housekeeping staff were felled with work-related, lost-time back injuries. Dodson said department heads received a guide on proper lifting techniques to circulate among their staff members.

The two-person lift technique has become a common sight in the grounds department, particularly because the



**Doug Sweeney, who has battled back problems his entire life, is vigilant about taking care of his back when lifting, pushing and climbing on and off equipment.**

maintenance team has to lift numerous heavy and awkward items.

"You get frustrated because you see two and three guys doing jobs, but it's better for safety reasons," says Dodson, who has made a point of stressing the importance of good lifting techniques to his team.

At Grand Island Municipal GC, Hadwick and Sweeney oversee a number of senior citizen workers, who range in age from 63 to nearly 80 years old. These senior employees knew from day one that lifting was not in their job description.

"We go out of our way to make sure they don't have to do the lifting or even get on and off the mowers repeatedly," Hadwick says. "On our staff, we make a joke: 'Let's not make the old guy do the physical labor.'"

The approach works.

"We haven't had any serious problems," Hadwick says. "We're pretty much on top of it. We work it out so the younger guys can do that stuff. In our jobs, we have to do a lot of lifting. We have to get things done. You can't avoid it completely." ■

*Suttell is a Cleveland-based free-lance writer.*

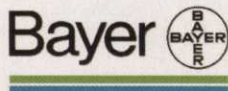
# Now you have access to the industry's best research -

# FREE

■ TurfGrass Trends' award-winning content is organized by category in a completely searchable article database

■ Get your hands on the latest scientific solutions for the green industry in a snap

BROUGHT TO YOU BY:



Precision cut. Legendary performance.



The screenshot shows the TurfGrass Trends website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for Home, Current Issue, Archive, Editors, Ad Rates, Subscribe, and Email TGT. Below this is a search bar and a sidebar with various categories like Disease, Equipment, Growth Regulators, Irrigation, Plant Nutrition, Soil, Turfgrass Cultivars, Weed Control, Lists, and Subjects. The main content area features an article titled "A Practical Research Journal" with a sub-headline "Search for Resistant Oleria Alternative for the Future". The article text discusses a breeding program at the University of Georgia-Gulfen. To the right of the article is a "NEED TO KNOW" section with several links to related content.

[www.TurfGrassTrends.com](http://www.TurfGrassTrends.com)