

Injury Prevention

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National Tradies Health Month

You may have seen some media attention given to National Tradies Health Month. I have been closely involved with this, due to consultancy work I do on injury prevention in the construction industry. On August 2, along with Paul Breen from Productivity Bootcamp, I did a TV interview on Channel 9's Today Extra speaking about the high risk for injury in construction, and the importance of prevention.

Tradies Health Month was launched by the Australian Physiotherapy Association, in response to the fact that people in the trades suffer 60% of serious work-place injuries, yet only make up around 30% of the workforce.

Just like the push for people, particularly 'blokes', to talk about mental health issues, it is recognized that most tradies like to tough it out when they have injuries, rather than get them seen to. Part of the APA campaign is to educate tradies and their families that workplace 'niggles' can become persistent pain problems, or injuries leading to time off work. They are encouraged to seek appropriate care before problems get out of control.

In my consultancy work, education to workers and managers is much more detailed. Workplace prevention strategies include the following:

1. Design of a *work-specific* morning warm-up to get muscles and joints ready for the strenuous tasks of the day. This isn't 'stretching'. It's about readying the nerve and muscle/joint systems for dynamic activity.

And it is based on the latest sports medicine research.

2. Training workers **how to move**. Through more than 25 years of rehabilitating back injuries, I have developed a system of identifying inefficient movement strategies, and progressively training safe movement. This builds towards whole body *kinetic chain* efficient movement for all complex work tasks. In industry, the training most workers get for lifting and handling is "bend your knees, not your back". This is overly simplistic, and often not even the correct way. There is a lot more to safe lifting that can be taught.
3. Advice regarding stretches that workers can do as part of their working day, to de-stress joints that are overloaded by the specific work demands.
4. Advice regarding activity outside of work. A lot of (particularly young) people are physically inactive, and they come into the workforce under-prepared. One study of apprentice construction workers showed that those who adopted sedentary postures outside of work were 3 times more likely to have a work-related low back injury. Another study showed that lack of physical activity was a risk factor for work injury in the general construction population. This is not surprising considering the very physical nature of many trades.

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I have performed injury screening on dozens of trainee construction workers. Based on well-recognised standard data on injury risk, I found over 50% were at medium to high risk for low back injury. This was mainly through muscle endurance factors, but also poor flexibility and inefficient dynamic body postures. Poor movement control can be due to lack of training, poor endurance, flexibility factors, or inadequate control between the central nervous system and the moving body. Observe the two different strategies adopted for a squatting task by the workers in the picture. The worker on the left is at higher risk for neck, shoulder, back, knee and ankle injury.



I have coined the term “industrial athletes” to describe construction workers. Their daily workload can be greater than that for many elite athletes, but often they are not trained adequately for the task.



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