BACK BELTS

Back belts are usually made of elastic material and can be cinched tightly around the waist, like a girdle, when one is ready to lift something heavy. They often have suspenders that hold them in place when they are not cinched tightly. They have become popular with workers in jobs that require heavy lifting (warehouse workers or longshoremen, baggage handlers, and stocking clerks).

Claims for Back Belts

- Proponents of back belts claim they prevent back injuries by various means, including reducing internal forces on the spine during lifting, increasing intra-abdominal pressure which counters the forces on the spine, stiffening the spine which decreases forces on it, restricting bending range of motion to prevent overextending, and reminding the wearer to lift carefully. They claim that back belts have reduced injuries in the workplace.

NIOSH & Scientific Support

- According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), which has continued to review the scientific literature on the effects of back belts, none of the above claims have been conclusively proven.
- NIOSH has concerns that use of back belts can lead workers to lift more than they should because of a sense of security, putting them at greater risk of injury.
- NIOSH does not recommend the use of back belts to prevent injuries while lifting because of the inconsistent and unproven effects.
- NIOSH recommends that employers implement an ergonomics program that reviews the work environment and work tasks to identify the hazards of lifting.
- Training workers in identifying lifting hazards and using safe lifting techniques/methods is the most effective way to reduce lifting injuries.

UCR Position

EH&S concurs with NIOSH and does not support the use of back belts nor considers back belts to be personal protective equipment, for the following reasons:

- Back belts have not been shown to protect employees from back injuries
- They do not protect people when using improper lifting methods
- They cannot replace the physical conditioning needed for the job
- They will not provide support for lifting loads beyond a person's normal capabilities

Recommendations for Supervisors

If an employee feels a back belt is needed to safely perform the job:

- Evaluate the work area and method to see if changes can be made to reduce loads
- Provide employees training in back injury prevention
- EH&S offers training classes, literature, and videos on back injury prevention

Visit www.ehs.ucr.edu for additional information or call EH&S at 827-5528 if you have any questions.