



Workers' Compensation

City and County of San Francisco
Department of Human Resources

Safety and Health Matters Newsletter

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Physician's Corner

COVID and Workplace Safety

By Fiona Wilson, MD

Chief Physician for CCSF Employees

COVID Update

COVID is in an endemic phase, with ongoing but less severe infection and illness. In this backdrop, the City and County of San Francisco relaxed its employee vaccine mandate. This update may leave employees wondering what it means for health and safety in our work environments.

The City and County of San Francisco workforce continues to be remarkably vaccinated, with up to 98% of current employees vaccinated. Though not a requirement, DHR will continue to encourage all employees to stay current with COVID vaccination, including obtaining the newest COVID vaccine available since September 2023. Existing measures prior to relaxing the vaccination mandate remain in place to manage COVID infections.



Limiting COVID infection and spread is up to all of us continuing the precautionary measures and notification requirements we have already been following including:

- Masking during an outbreak
- Reminding employees to stay home if they are sick
- Masking for 10 days after COVID exposure, or after COVID illness
- Obtaining the new COVID vaccination from your healthcare provider or [retail location](#)

Due to our collective diligence and vaccination rate, San Francisco has the lowest workers' compensation costs for COVID infection in the State of California.

Workplace Safety

One of the primary ways we can support our workforce is to focus on healthy workplace safety practices. This focus includes regular self-care and an emphasis on reducing preventable injuries. In this issue of the Quarterly Safety and Health Matters Newsletter, you will find an [article on back injury prevention](#). Back injuries can be painful and have long recoveries. Please ensure that your staff are practicing proper back safety protocols in the workplace.

Another aspect of workplace safety is the potential for violence in the workplace. We are all aware of the growing challenges to personal safety, with the rise of assaultive behaviors witnessed across the U.S. and not unique to San Francisco. These events cause us all distress. Though not high in number, there has been a slow rise in assaultive actions taken against City employees over the last five years. DHR is looking at concrete and effective steps to increase employees' safety and reduce harm to our City workforce. Please review the [article on workplace violence prevention](#) for details on these matters.

Finally, being prepared for the unexpected, including extreme weather events and natural disasters, is critical in our quickly changing climate. The [article on being prepared for fire and smoke season](#) provides information on preparedness measures all of us can take to stay safe and healthy during wildfire season.

Workplace Health and Safety



Understanding Back Safety and Preventing Back Injuries

By Tyler Nguyen, CSP REP, Citywide Safety Officer

Twisting and turning, standing up, and sitting down – these simple movements can quickly lead to back injury if done

incorrectly. The Bureau of Labor Statistics and the City's workers' compensation loss data indicate that nearly 20% of all workers' compensation claims filed come as a result of workers'

back pain and injuries, and the National Institute of Health reports that 80 percent of adults will experience low back pain in their lifetimes.

Back pain can be caused by repeatedly lifting heavy materials, poor posture, sudden movements, lifting and twisting at the same time, or bending over for long periods. Poor posture, poor physical condition, stress, and repetitive trauma may also contribute to back pain. Back pain can vary from a dull, constant ache to a sudden, sharp pain that makes it hard to move. There are generally two types of back pain: acute and chronic.

Acute back pain is defined as back pain that begins suddenly and lasts less than six weeks. This is the most common type of back pain and is usually caused by an injury. This type of pain usually gets better on its own and doesn't require significant medical attention or surgery.

Chronic back pain, not as common as acute back pain, is defined as back pain that can last for three months or more. It can be caused by other medical conditions such as arthritis, fibromyalgia, or a more serious injury. Chronic back pain could require surgery, but doctors aim to avoid this route by trying nonsurgical treatments first, such as exercise and hot or cold treatments. Be sure to watch for signs that indicate back pain is signaling a more serious problem.

Preventing Back Pain

Experts offer the following suggestions for keeping back pain at bay:

1. **Stay in shape.** Low-impact aerobic activities such as swimming, bicycling, or walking are ideal because they strengthen the back and abdominal muscles and also stimulate endorphins, which help kill pain.
2. **Maintain a healthy weight.** People who carry more weight on their spine are at a higher risk of straining muscles in their backs.
3. **Don't smoke.** Aside from the countless other reasons not to smoke, scientists believe that nicotine hampers the flow of blood to the vertebrae and disks. In addition, smokers tend to lose bone faster than nonsmokers, putting them at a higher risk for pain.
4. **Lighten your load.** A purse, briefcase, or backpack could be causing back pain. Minimizing the weight in any of these items may reduce or eliminate back pain.
5. **Stretch.** Take breaks to stretch and short walks to loosen up.
6. **Sit properly.** Your feet should rest comfortably on the floor (or a small stool) when you are seated. Keep your knees a bit higher than your hips and bend them at a 90-degree angle.
7. **Practice good posture.** Keep your ears, shoulders, and hips in a straight line, drawing your stomach in and keeping your head up.
8. **Set up a back-friendly workspace.** Your chair should have an adjustable backrest, wheels, lumbar support, and armrests to be supportive.

9. **Stand smart.** When required to stand for long periods of time, maintain a neutral pelvic position. Alternate placing your feet on a low footstool to take pressure off your lower back.
10. **Be aware of how you sleep.** Sleeping on your side and curling up your body a little bit is an ideal position to prevent back pain. Your pillow should keep your head and spine level, and your mattress should be firm enough so that your spine doesn't sag in your bed.



Lifting Techniques to Avoid Back Injury

If your regular work duties include lifting, twisting, and making repetitive motions, there are techniques that you can use to protect your back when lifting heavy loads, including:

- Sizing up the load before lifting the heavy object;
- Determining the lifting position; and
- Asking for help when needed.

When lifting a heavy object, use the following steps to avoid injury:

1. Place your feet close to the object;
 2. Center yourself over the load;
 3. Bend your knees;
 4. Ensure you have a good grip;
 5. Lift straight up—smoothly; and
 6. Let your legs—not your back—do the work.
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Developing a Workplace Violence Prevention Plan

By Carina Abdel Nour, MPH, CIH, Sr. Industrial Hygienist at SF Rec and Park

Tyler Nguyen, CSP REP, Citywide Safety Officer

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 23% of employees have experienced violence or harassment in the workplace, and it is estimated that about 25% of workplace violence cases go unreported. The risk for workplace violence is especially high in healthcare and social service industries, with 69% of physical workplace violence assaults and 71% of non-physical workplace violence assaults reported occurring in these industries.

During a time when workplace violence is on the rise across the country, having a workplace violence prevention plan (WVPP) is crucial to protecting employees and is now the law for California employers. [California Senate Bill 553 \(SB-553\)](#), titled "Occupational Safety: Workplace Violence: Restraining Orders and Workplace Violence Prevention Plan" and signed into law on September 27, 2023, requires employers to develop WVPPs as part of their Injury and Illness Prevention Programs already required by law, provide specified training on workplace violence prevention for employees, and to start maintaining workplace violence incident logs by July 1, 2024.

In preparation for implementing [SB-553](#), every City department must create a WVPP that includes requirements to maintain incident logs, provide specified trainings, and conduct periodic reviews of the WVPP. DHR will issue guidance on developing a WVPP in the coming months to aid department implementation by the July 1, 2024, deadline.



Emergency Preparedness: Fire Safety and Air Quality

As we head into the second half of fire season, emergency preparedness is key. Northern California remains relatively dry and is still in danger of wildfires. Utilize the guidance and resources below to keep yourself and your staff safe from fires and minimize exposure to poor air quality.

Emergency Alerts and Preparation

[AlertSF](#) is San Francisco's emergency text message system. AlertSF will send alerts and instructions following a natural disaster; weather emergency; major police, fire, or health emergency; or significant transportation disruptions to mobile subscribers. To sign up for AlertSF, text your zip code to 888-777 or visit alerts.sf.gov

[SF72](#) is San Francisco's hub for emergency preparedness. You'll find information about what to do in an emergency, simple steps to get connected, and useful guides to help you get prepared. Share SF72 with a friend—and help your loved ones and your city get prepared.

Fire Safety

Fires are possible throughout the year in California, but the peak fire season in Northern California usually begins in June or July and runs through late October or November. Prepare yourself and your family by following these steps:

1. Get ready: Being ready for wildfire starts with maintaining an adequate defensible space and by hardening your home by using fire resistant building materials.
2. Get set: Create a plan with your family to evacuate your home should wildfire strike. Put together an emergency supply kit. Learn how to talk with young children about fire safety.
3. Be ready to go: Give your household the best chance of surviving a wildfire by being ready to go and evacuating early. Being ready to go also means knowing when to evacuate and what to do if you become trapped.

For more fire safety tips, please visit <https://www.fire.ca.gov/prepare>

Air Quality

Wildfire smoke—a complex mixture of air pollutants—is unhealthy to breathe and can be especially dangerous for children, the elderly, pregnant women, and people with heart or respiratory conditions. These sensitive groups are advised to limit outdoor activities, especially when the Air Quality Index (AQI) reaches levels considered 'Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups' or above. Even healthy people may experience symptoms in smoky conditions or after exposure. Pets also can be affected by unhealthy air and should be brought indoors, if possible.

To learn about more tips from the Association of Bay Area Health Officers to help protect you before, during, and after an air quality emergency, please visit <https://www.sf72.org/hazard/air-quality>