

JAN

**Accommodating Individuals with
Back Impairments**

Job Accommodation Network

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<http://www.jan.wvu.edu>

A service of the Office of Disability Employment Policy
of the U.S. Department of Labor

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Preface

It is estimated seventy-five percent of the population will have low back pain at least once. While most individuals with back pain will recover without invasive treatment, some will have to deal with limitations for the rest of their lives. Accommodations for individuals with back impairments help individuals overcome these limitations and help keep them working.

In 1999, the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated nearly half of on-the-job injuries involving time away from work were caused by back injuries. Of these, 19.1% of the workers were out for 31 days or more. Employers involved in proactive workers' compensation case management focus on early return-to-work; with the use of accommodations, a win-win situation for employer and employee can result. Employers may also have to consider accommodations for employees injured off the job under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Employer responsibilities vary under the ADA but often effective accommodations enable employees with back impairments to perform job functions.

When considering accommodations for people with back impairments, the accommodation process must be conducted on a case-by-case basis. Functional limitations vary from person to person and job to job. When determining effective accommodations, the person's individual abilities and limitations should be considered and problematic job tasks must be identified. Therefore, the person with the back impairment should be involved in the accommodation process. If further information on the responsibilities of an employer and the rights of the individual under the ADA are needed, please feel free to contact JAN.

Not all people with back impairments will need accommodations to perform their jobs and many others may need only a few accommodations. For those who need accommodation, the following pages provide basic information about common limitations, symptoms, useful questions to consider, and accommodation possibilities. The following is only a sample of possibilities to consider; numerous other solutions and considerations may exist.

In addition to accommodation ideas, the following material includes information regarding some of the products available to accommodate people with back impairments. The information represents a sample of the possible products and vendors available. Numerous other products and vendors may exist. Also included in this publication is a list of resources for additional information.

What is back pain?

The spinal column is broken down into five sections: cervical (neck), thoracic, lumbar, sacrum, and coccyx. Ligaments, tendons, and muscles connect to vertebrae to provide structural support for the body. Between the

vertebrae are shock absorbing cushions called discs. Pain can occur when a ligament, tendon, or muscle becomes sprained or strained. Pain can also occur when one or more discs bulge out of designated spaces and put pressure on nerves.

What are the symptoms of back pain?

Symptoms of back pain can be localized or widespread radiating from a central point in the back. Sciatica is pain starting in the lower back and traveling down one or both legs.

What causes back pain?

Back pain may be caused from overuse, acute injury, vertebrae degeneration, nerve impingement, spinal stenosis (narrowing of the spinal canal), infection, and tumors.

Who gets back pain?

It is estimated that 75% of the population will have at least one episode of back pain during a lifespan. Contributing factors to back pain may include poor conditioning, overuse, obesity, cigarette smoking, and age.

How is back pain treated?

Most back injuries are treated with non-invasive treatment techniques. Treatment options include drug therapy, chiropractic adjustments, acupuncture, physical therapy, and rest. In a few cases surgery may need to be performed; some surgery options are vertebrae fusion, discectomy, and laminectomy.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN DETERMINING ACCOMMODATIONS

1. What symptoms or limitations is the individual with back pain experiencing?
2. How do these symptoms or limitations affect the person and the person's job performance?
3. What specific job tasks are problematic as a result of these symptoms and limitations?
4. What accommodations are available to reduce or eliminate these problems?
5. Are all possible resources being used to determine possible accommodations?
6. Has the employee with back pain been consulted regarding possible accommodations?
7. Once accommodations are in place, would it be useful to meet with the person with back pain to evaluate the effectiveness of the accommodations and to determine whether additional accommodations are needed?
8. Do supervisory personnel and employees need training regarding back pain, other disability areas, or the Americans with Disabilities Act?

ACCOMMODATION CONSIDERATIONS FOR PEOPLE WITH BACK IMPAIRMENTS

Activities of Daily Living

- Allow use of a personal attendant at work
- Allow use of a service animal at work
- Make sure the facility is accessible

- Move workstation closer to the restroom
- Allow longer breaks
- Refer to appropriate community services

Fatigue and Weakness

- Reduce or eliminate physical exertion and workplace stress
- Schedule periodic rest breaks away from the workstation
- Allow a flexible work schedule and flexible use of leave time
- Allow work from home
- Implement ergonomic workstation design
- Provide a scooter or other mobility aid if walking cannot be reduced

Gross Motor Impairment:

General

- Modify the work-site to make it accessible
- Provide parking close to the work-site
- Provide an accessible entrance
- Install automatic door openers
- Provide an accessible restroom and break room
- Provide an accessible route of travel to other work areas used by the employee
- Modify the workstation to make it accessible

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- Make sure materials and equipment are within reach range
- Move workstation close to other work areas and break rooms

Industrial

- Provide overhead structure for lifting devices
- Modify the work area to make it adjustable
- Place frequently used tools and supplies at or near waist height
- Provide low task chairs for work that cannot be brought to waist height
- Provide stand/lean stools and anti-fatigue mats for standing work
- Make wheelchairs, scooters, industrial tricycles, or golf carts available if walking long distances is required
- Provide compact lifting devices to push and pull supplies and tools from storage

Office

- Provide a height adjustable desk and ergonomic chair
- Move workstation close to common use office equipment
- Provide low task chair and rolling safety ladder to access high and low file drawers and supplies

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- Provide a cart to move files, mail, and supplies
- Provide a lazy Susan carousel or desktop organizers to access frequently used materials

Service

- Provide anti-fatigue mats and stand/lean stools for functions requiring long periods of standing
- Provide a height adjustable desk and ergonomic chair
- Move workstation close to commonly used office equipment
- Provide compact lifting devices to push and pull stock and supplies from shelves
- Provide carts to move supplies and stock

Medical

- Provide a spring bottomed linen cart
- Make patient lifting and transfer devices available
- Make wheelchairs, scooters, industrial tricycles, or golf carts available if walking long distances is required
- Train employees on proper lifting techniques and on proper use of patient lifting and transfer devices
- Provide powered beds for transporting patients
- Provide a height adjustable desk and ergonomic task chairs to fit use for different people

EXAMPLE ACCOMMODATIONS FOR PEOPLE WITH BACK CONDITIONS

A systems administrator with a back impairment is required to move, lift, and carry computers throughout the office. The person was accommodated with a compact, adjustable height lifting device with straps to secure the load.

A maintenance worker with a bending and lifting restriction due to a back injury is required to lift manhole covers. The worker was accommodated with a truck mounted jib crane and manhole cover lifter.

A clerical worker with scoliosis has sitting and standing restrictions. Because the worker is required to work at a desk a majority of the time, the worker was accommodated with an ergonomic workstation evaluation, ergonomic chair, and a sit/stand computer workstation.

A mechanic with a bending restriction due to a low back impairment has problems accessing the engine compartment and low task areas of vehicles. The mechanic was accommodated with a tire lift, a mechanic's low task chair, and a specialty creeper designed to support the body while accessing engine compartments.

A file clerk with a back impairment has functional limitations limiting her ability to bend and access files in low file drawers. An electric automated filing system was purchased to allow accessing of file drawers at a standing height.

A chemical process plant worker is limited in his ability to turn large wheel valves due to a back injury. The worker was accommodated with a specialty tool designed to increase torque on wheel valve handles.

An appliance delivery driver with a lifting restriction due to a low back injury was accommodated with a stair climbing hand truck. This battery-operated piece of equipment also doubles as a lift gate to help lower appliances on and off the truck.

A grocer check-out person with a standing restriction due to a back injury was accommodated with a sit/lean stool and anti-fatigue mats.

A mailroom worker with a push/pull restriction was required to deliver the mail on a cart that weighed more than the individual's push/pull restriction. An accommodation of a motorized cart allowed the person to stay on the job.

A truck driver with a back impairment was limited in the time he could drive. Accommodations of a suspension seat and a vehicle cushion designed to reduce vibrations allowed the driver to comfortably sit for longer periods of time.

A health care worker with a lifting restriction was accommodated with patient transfer devices and individualized training on proper use and selection of the equipment.

PRODUCTS

There are numerous products that can be used to accommodate people with back impairments. JAN's Searchable Online Accommodation Resource at <<http://www.jan.wvu.edu/soar>> is designed to let users explore various accommodation options. Many product vendor lists are accessible through this system; however, JAN provides these lists and many more that are not available on the Web site upon request. Contact JAN directly if you have specific

accommodation situations, are looking for products, need vendor information, or are seeking a referral.

Sample products include:

Adjustable / Ergonomic Chairs

Compact Lifting Devices

Ergonomic Equipment

Independent Living Aids

Patient Lifting Devices

Sit / Stand Workstations

Stand / Lean Stools

Stair Climbing Hand Trucks

Supine Workstations
