

Preventing Strains in the Veterinary Practice

Muscle strains from lifting do not rank in the top three most common injuries in veterinary practices, however, strains rank second in percentage of total loss dollars spent for medical treatment and lost time. Strain injuries rank as the fourth most common injury with bites and scratches being the most common.

This chart illustrates the percentage dollar loss from strains, average claim, and indemnity costs in California in the workers' compensation class code 8831–HOSPITALS–veterinary–all employees—including receptionists.

	% of Loss Dollars	Average Claim Cost	Average Cost/Indemnity Claim
Strain by lifting	12.06%	\$13,072	\$42,103
Strain or injury by NOC	8.26%	\$9,296	\$30,333
Strain by repetitive motion	5.37%	\$20,631	\$48,361
Strain by holding or carrying	3.19%	\$12,243	\$41,062

(Source: Workers' Compensation Insurance Rating Bureau, 2012-2016)

There is no one magical approach to eliminate these injuries. What is needed is a multi-prong method that considers the ergonomic risk factors associated with a task, lifting equipment, and training.

The most effective way to address workplace injuries is to consider engineering controls. Although not the ultimate answer, engineering controls do not rely on people to do the lifting task. Employees must use a device or tool to mitigate the risk from lifting, letting equipment or machines do the heavy lifting. Examples of engineering controls in a veterinary practice include:

- Elimination, adjustment, or reduction of the position, size, or weight of the object being lifted. For example, instead of purchasing 50-pound bags of dog food, purchase 25-pound bags. Your employees and customers will likely appreciate this.
- Proper storage of heavy or awkward items. Items such as large dog food bags (50 pounds) need to be stored between knuckle and shoulder height to eliminate the low lifts. This type of lift is the cause of many back strains.
- Examination tables, bathing tubs, and catch chutes that can be adjusted to varying heights.
- Devices to assist in lifting or restraint. Examples include lift tables or stairs leading into elevated baths and kennels.

In veterinary practices, administrative controls may result in employees experiencing the most positive results. Administrative controls rely on an employee

to take action to reduce the risk of injury. Examples of administrative controls include:

- Establishing a policy that any animal weighing over 30 pounds must be lifted by two people. Thirty pounds is a recommended guideline. Studies find that employees are more susceptible to back injury when repetitive lifts from below or near knee level are performed.
- Train employees to use good lifting mechanics. Lifting a large animal is not like lifting a box. The principles are the same but the box does not squirm or have teeth. Also, consider doing stretching exercises prior to opening so employees can warm up before physical exertion.
- Back belts can be considered but ONLY if the employees are trained on good lifting mechanics first. Back belts alone do not provide any protection against a back strain if good mechanics are not used.

Employees need to be reminded regularly to use administrative controls. These controls are effective only when used and that means continually reminding employees at regular staff meetings and when they fail to use the proper procedure.

Many injuries in the veterinary practice are preventable. Having a positive perspective towards injury prevention and knowing that you CAN make a difference in the number and kind of injuries is the first step. Developing a plan to achieve that normally requires nothing more than good old fashion common sense! ■

Information provided by Preferred Employers Insurance, a Berkeley Company.