



FIT To Be Towed

Able towmen who ignore their health are courting disability

By Allan T. Duffin

You spend a lot of time on the road. Driving a tow truck is a tough job with heavy demands that, left unchecked, can eat away at a tower's well-being and attitude. So ask yourself: How's my health?

"If you're on call, you might be working at almost any hour, day or night," said Teresa Moore, M.D., a family physician in Charlotte Court House, Virginia. "With those kinds of demands on your system, your health is directly related to your work and lifestyle habits."

Balancing a busy job with the other daily requirements of life — family responsibilities, fitness, nutrition, and managing stress, to name a few — is a lot for anyone to tackle. So how can towers effectively maintain or improve their health while on the job?

Towing's Tough

Perhaps no one sees a greater variety of health issues than managers who deal with on-the-job injuries. Colleen Deutsch, the worker's compensation manager for the nation's largest towing company, United Road Towing in Mokena, IL, coordinates 10 divisions across the United States. Each division in the network has its own claim handler who works directly with the main support office, where Deutsch monitors "every incident, every doctor's appointment, and any litigation that might arise, from the time the injury occurs until the time it closes with the insurance company."

Although after 17 years in the business she's seen just about everything, sometimes an injury still causes

Deutsch to raise an eyebrow. "Last March, for the first time, I actually had a driver who slipped on a banana peel," she recalled. "He sprained his wrist."

That incident had its humorous side, "but it's important to know that 50 percent of the injuries we deal with are slips and falls," she said. "Busy tow truck drivers have slipped on everything from ice to gravel to oil on the roadway." In addition, towers have twisted their ankles and received contusions from banging their elbows on obstructions. Other common injuries include back problems resulting from pushing, pulling, or bending their bodies in order to hook up a vehicle.

One of the key health concerns for towers — and a huge concern for medical experts as well — is the prevention and treatment of lower back problems, which are common among people who spend most of their workday in a sitting position. "Sitting, in general, is the least desirable position for the lower back," said Chuck Berg, D.C., a chiropractor based in River Vale, NJ and author of the new book *Is Your Lifestyle Killing You?* "Towers spend a good part of their day in a relatively sedentary position. That's how we spend the bulk of our time while driving."

Sitting = Sedentary

According to Berg, sitting, far more than standing or lying down, increases pressure on the lower discs of the spine. Deutsch noted that another reason for back problems among towers is the rapid rate of activity during recovery jobs. "At an accident scene, because there's a need to get vehicle traffic moving again, tow truck drivers are working at very high rates of speed," she said. "Sometimes in the rush to hurry and hook up a car, towers can twist their backs."

To improve and maintain their health, Berg first encouraged towers to understand the effects of constant pressure exerted on the human body. "Most of us aren't really conscious about our day-to-day routine," he pointed out. "I wake up, then sit down to have my breakfast. I get in my car, where I sit as I drive to work. I get to work, where I sit all day. I sit for lunch, drive home in a sitting position, sit for dinner, then sit to watch some television."

Berg noted that advances in technology



An impressive setting for two of the heavies from G&S Service/I-80 Towing in Johnston, IA, owned by Glenn Mikel

have driven Americans to spend much of their time in a sedentary position. If not addressed early enough, he said, this type of lifestyle can lead to arthritis as well as hip and lower back problems. For tow truck drivers, "these health issues can make them unable to do their jobs," which directly affects their business and salary.

Visiting a medical expert can be beneficial to towers who are experiencing back pain that is affecting their work. "Lower back problems need to be addressed by a physician to rule out not only serious medical conditions such as disc herniations or osteoarthritis but also other possible causes such as abdominal hernias," said Geoffrey Lloyd, D.O., a doctor of osteopathic medicine in Burbank, CA. "Eventually these conditions can be physically debilitating and sometimes life-threatening."

There are different modes of treatment, and towers should choose the approach with which they are most comfortable. While M.D.s might prescribe analgesic medicine (painkillers) or anti-inflammatory remedies coupled with an exercise and nutrition plan, osteopathic doctors like Lloyd add the use of their hands to assist with the body's natural healing capabilities to reduce pain, ease muscle tension, and improve circulation.

What You Can Do

In addition to visiting a medical professional, Berg noted that there are a number of things that towers can do immediately to put them on the road to better physical conditioning:

Lumbar cushions. Berg recommended that tow truck drivers invest in lumbar seat cushions to help alleviate

stress on the spine. Simple and inexpensive, lumbar cushions "gently increase the curve in the lower back," said Berg, who noted that most chairs force the spine into an unnaturally straight position. The seat pillow helps the spine remain in its normal contour.

Get out, move around. Although it would be helpful for towers to spend 30 to 40 minutes of their workday exercising, "this can be difficult if not impossible if you're on call and never know when you'll be needed at an incident site," said Moore. However, she and Berg offered one easy solution: "Get out of the truck as often as possible." Just stepping out of the cab and moving around — a form of light exercise — can boost a tower's level of fitness. "Be consciously aware as you move your body," recommended Berg.

Bend at the knees. In addition, he said, towers should make sure that they bend at the knees when performing activities such as hooking up a disabled vehicle. "Doing straight bends puts an enormous amount of tension on your lower back," he added.

Shrug often. Berg recommended that towers relieve shoulder tension by shrugging. "While you're driving, raise your shoulders to your ears, like a little kid saying, 'I don't know.'" Because the human head weighs 14 to 16 pounds, the neck and upper back muscles undergo significant amounts of stress. "Remember that you're carrying an average men's bowling ball on your neck," said Berg.

Quick exercises like shrugging and deep breathing send a signal to the body that "life is not an emergency." Lloyd noted that a number of simple on-the-job exercises can be squeezed



Dr. Chuck Berg, health author and chiropractor

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instead the byproduct of an already stressful situation.

Manage your time. Crowded scheduling can be another culprit on the road to good health. "Time management is vital for drivers to be able to work efficiently and with appropriate breaks between jobs," said Lloyd. At G&S Service, owner Glen Mikel regularly encourages his drivers to get plenty of sleep and schedules at least one day a week off without any distractions from the company. Mikel has another, rather unique, solution: a Jack Russell terrier named Jack. As friendly as he is furry, Jack helps lower stress in the shop by engaging the drivers to pet and play with him.

Small things like this on the part of management go a long way toward helping employees live a better life. "There is nothing more important than taking care of our employees," said Deutsch. "We're nothing without them."

But in the end, personal health is up to the individual driver. Small things like simple exercises and carrying healthy snacks can make a huge difference in day-to-day life. As Berg noted, "It's all about the decisions we make to take care of ourselves." ❖

The health-related information provided in this article is for educational and informational purposes only. For tips on how to improve your specific situation, please visit your health care provider.



It Can Happen To You

Many hidden safety and health issues can affect towers

By Teresa Moore, M.D.

The physical demands of recovering and towing vehicles predispose tow truck drivers to a number of sprains, strains, overuse syndromes, and back problems, including herniated discs. Over time, the same physical demands may increase their chances of developing osteoarthritis (arthritis due to wear and tear).

While working around wrecked vehicles, lacerations and abrasions along with potentially deadly secondary infections are possible. In addition, being out in all types of weather poses its own risks. Even though you don't actually catch a cold by being out in the cold, frequent extremes of temperature caused by going from a heated cab into the freezing cold or from an air-conditioned cab into the blistering heat can increase your likelihood of getting respiratory infections.

upset even when taken according to the package directions.

Nutrition Knowledge

Because of the varied work hours associated with calls at all times of the day and night, tow truck drivers' lifestyle habits contribute to health issues. In the short term, eating on the run increases symptoms of acid reflux and indigestion. There may be other gastrointestinal problems, especially if hand washing is not done before eating.

In the long run, a diet of fast food, which is typically high in fat, salt, and sugar and low in fiber, increases the risk of high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, obesity, cancer and other chronic health problems.

Lack of exercise is also associated with the same health problems. Inadequate sleep increases the risk of high blood pressure, glucose intolerance (a precursor to Type 2 diabetes,) obesity, as well as motor vehicle accidents.

Although it is easy to grab a burger in between jobs, it is not always the healthiest option. As noted in the cover story, while packing meals with fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains is the healthiest option, it is often not the most convenient.

When packing lunch isn't possible, convenience stores carry bottled water, yogurt, nuts, and whole or dried fruits which have more nutritional value than a soda and candy bar. More than ever, convenience stores also carry single size servings of applesauce, cheddar cheese, and raisins which are all portable and healthier than fast food.

Individual-sized boxes of dry cereal like Raisin Bran or Cheerios are alternatives to a breakfast biscuit at the nearest drive-through or an afternoon snack of potato chips or Doritos.

Even when dining at the local fast food restaurant, bottled water or diet drinks are better choices than sugar-laden sodas. Also, choose the menu items lowest in calories, saturated and trans fats. Some chains carry the nutritional information onsite for all items and some require you to request this information from the company headquarters.

In addition, there are many Internet sites that allow you to compare menu items from your favorite chains. One that I like is www.foodfacts.info. It also offers a handy book to keep in your truck with all the data from the most popular fast food chains.

"Long-distance drivers are at risk for blood clots in the legs"

Painful sunburns that also increase the chance of skin cancer years down the road are also on-the-job risks. Heat exhaustion and heat stroke can occur in warm weather. Frostbite and hypothermia can occur in cold weather.

Less likely, and yet still possible, are infectious diseases such as hepatitis B and C, and HIV infection caused by blood at an accident scene. Long distance drivers are also at risk for blood clots in the legs that can dislodge, go to the lungs, and cause death.

Medications that drivers use to keep working despite exhaustion or illness can also cause problems by virtue of their side effects. Treating sleepiness with over-the-counter stimulants may increase the chance of high blood pressure and abnormal rhythms of the heart. Store-bought treatments for cold and allergy symptoms may cause sedation, further compounding drowsiness caused by any lack of sleep.

In fact, some of these types of readily-available antihistamines that are used in allergy and cold medications impair driving as much or more than alcohol. Over-the-counter analgesics may aggravate or cause symptoms of stomach

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