

WEED WHACKER GETS BACK OUT OF WHACK

Question: My back hurts every time I use my weed whacker. What can I do to avoid this?

Answer: Weed whackers, leaf blowers and hedge clippers are wonderful tools for creating beautiful landscape. However, they can easily strain the back muscles, causing back pain, spasms and misalignments.

The biggest problem is leverage. When you hold a weed whacker out in front of you, it requires a significant muscular contraction in your back to hold you upright. Let's say a weed whacker weighs 5 lbs. If you hold this close to your body, it feels like 5 lbs to your low back. However, if you hold your arms outstretched and reach, now the force on your low back is multiplied by four times. That is, a 5 lb weed whacker feels like a 20 lb weed whacker to your low back.

Now combine this seemingly additional weight with bending and twisting; you have a back injury waiting to happen!

You are most vulnerable when reaching out or overhead. The following are some tips for avoiding injury:

Regardless of what piece of equipment you are using, make sure it has a strap - and that you use it. Place the strap over your head on the shoulder on the opposite side from the device. This will help normalize your center of gravity.

Be sure to switch the side on which you are operating equipment as often as possible, and to balance the muscles being used. Alternate your stance and motion frequently.

Take frequent breaks from the activity of the day. When your muscles begin to fatigue, you are at higher risk for back injury.

If you are starting to have back pain, take a rest and use ice for 20 minutes. This can reduce inflammation, pain and spasm. You can then do some gentle stretches as follows, to warm up your back.

When stretching, breathe in and out slowly and do not force the muscle to stretch. Do not bounce or jerk; if you have pain, you need to ease off.

Stretch your hamstring muscles (back of thighs). Stand up and prop your heel on a doorstep or stool with your knee slightly bent. Bend forward until you feel the back of your thigh stretch. Hold for 20 seconds, relax and do the other leg.

Stretch your quadriceps muscle (front of thigh). Bend your left knee, grab your left ankle with your left hand and pull your heel towards your buttocks. Hold for 20 seconds and repeat with the other leg.

Weave your fingers together with your palms up. Lean to one side for 20 seconds to stretch the side of your upper body and then reverse.

Give yourself a hug. Wrap your arms around yourself and rotate to one side. Hold for 20 seconds and repeat.

Consider using electric-powered tools, as they are much lighter than gas-powered engines.

If you experience pain when using your equipment, stop and rest. If this does not go away, see your doctor of chiropractic. Chiropractic is safe and very effective when treating back pain.

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