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Study: Back Belts Found Ineffective

By LINDSEY TANNER, AP Medical Writer

CHICAGO--Just in time for all those workers handling heavy holiday packages, new research suggests that back belts widely used in industry to prevent lifting injuries don't work.

The findings, based on interviews and worker-compensation claims, stem from a study of more than 9,000 employees at Wal-Mart stores in 30 states.

"Back belt use is not associated with reduced incidence of back injury claims or low back pain in material handlers," the researchers wrote in Wednesday's Journal of the American Medical Association.

The study was done by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

An increasing number of employers use back belts to try to prevent back injuries, which are one of the nation's most common occupational disorders, costing the nation an estimated \$20 billion to \$50 billion a year, according to NIOSH. The researchers noted that about 4 million back belts were purchased in 1995 alone to try to prevent back injuries.

The snug belts are purported to help strengthen muscles that support the spine, though little research has been done on them.

A study published in 1996 on back belt use at Home Depot stores in California suggested that the belts reduced the incidence of back injuries.

But NIOSH statistician Douglas Landsittel, a co-author of the JAMA study, said the previous study focused only on California stores.

There is no companywide policy on belt use at Wal-Mart, the nation's largest retailer. Some stores require belts for certain employees involved in heavy lifting, such as those in shipping and receiving, said Wal-Mart spokesman Tom Williams.

Williams said the company collaborated with NIOSH after many employees questioned whether the belts did any good. He said Wal-Mart is studying the findings and will use them to improve work conditions.

The researchers interviewed 9,377 employees at 160 Wal-Mart stores and collected workers' compensation data between 1996 and 1998. The study included 89 stores that required back belts. Those used were made of stretchable nylon, adjusted with Velcro straps.

About two-thirds of the workers in stores with mandatory belt use reported wearing them daily, compared with about one-third of those at stores where use was voluntary.

There were 195 workers' compensation claims filed for back injury during the study, and of 6,311 employees who completed follow-up interviews, there were 1,088 reports of frequent back pain.

Employees who wore the belts regularly were just as likely to report back pain or file claims as those who didn't wear them.

Despite the findings, some workers swear by their belts. Benita Mills, 38, a Federal Express driver in Chicago, said the one her company requires her to wear has helped her avoid back injuries.

"I've been doing this for eight to 10 years and I've never hurt my back," Mills said.

The findings were questioned by an official with the International Mass Retail Association, an industry group whose members include 200 retail chains, including Wal-Mart and Home

Depot.

The researchers did not directly compare workers doing the same jobs, said Morrison Cain, the group's senior vice president of government affairs.

"I don't believe this establishes conclusively one way or the other whether back belts work," Cain said.

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On the Net: <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/backfs.html>
<http://jama.ama-assn.org>

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