

## Protecting Your Most Valuable Asset—Your Body

By Robert M. Bennette, President, Bennette Design Group, Inc.

One of the most overlooked and abused tools in the plumbing industry isn't a pipe wrench, drill or torch, but the plumber's body. Tools found in a toolbox can always be replaced or upgraded when needed, but when you or a crew member is off the job due to a back strain or knee problems, it becomes a very serious matter. Injuries are not only painful and can keep you from working, they can also adversely affect a company's revenue and overall profitability.

Taking measures to prevent avoidable injuries can lead to improved productivity and help ensure a long-lasting career in the plumbing trade. Many progressive plumbing companies have now implemented on-going safety awareness programs to reduce injuries on the job. Also, providing educational information on the benefits of using tools that may reduce wear and tear on the plumber's body is now becoming standard practice with both existing and new employees.

### Strain on the Back and Knees

Plumbers face difficult field conditions on a daily basis and they must place their bodies in awkward and strenuous positions to access and complete plumbing work. Typical plumbing work requires lying over hard, uneven surfaces or kneeling for extended periods of time. Over the years plumbers have improvised to provide some level of body support, or have just accepted the fact that they are going to be uncomfortable doing their work.

Specifically, working on plumbing located inside bathroom vanities or kitchen cabinets usually entails laying over the edge of a cabinet toe-kick (4"-7" in height), which is a notorious cause for pain to the back and ribs. Prolonged kneeling on hard surfaces like tile, concrete or wood is common for p-h-c contractors, and it can take a toll on healthy knees over time. Job

conditions for p-h-c tradesmen tend to be physically challenging to say the least, but there are now tools available that can greatly improve how your body feels after a service call spent working under a sink or kneeling in front of a boiler.

### Injuries Leading To "Missed Days Of Work"

Let's look at some Bureau of Labor statistics about injuries leading to "Missed Days of Work" that reinforce the idea that companies should implement some preventive measures to avoid injuries:

- ◆ In 2003, of the 21,590 reported injuries to p-h-c contractors that involved missed days from work, nearly 19 percent of the injuries required three to five days of missed work.
- ◆ There were also 2,240 reported knee injuries within this group that led to missed days of work.
- ◆ For every 10,000 p-h-c tradesmen, there were 273 reported injuries leading to missed days of work, and 28 percent of these injuries involved the back or shoulders.

### Stretching Exercises Help

These statistics prove that workers are most susceptible to injury after periods of non-activity, specifically evenings and weekends. To help prevent muscular strains, it is always good practice to stretch your muscles prior to physical activity. For example, many plumbing service calls require driving (sitting) to a jobsite, and then immediately crawling under a sink to diagnose a problem. The body is seriously stressed under these conditions when a major shift in activity occurs. Implementing simple stretching exercises after sitting for periods of time can really help prevent back strain and injury.



### Investing In New "Tools of the Trade"

Professional plumbers invest in the latest tools and technologies every day to maintain a competitive edge and help improve productivity. Plumbers may want to take a hard look at new ergonomic tools that can reduce common fatigue and strain on the back and knees. Not only can stress on the body be greatly reduced with these new tools, it also makes good business sense to take advantage of support tools that help reduce "down time" due to avoidable injuries.

As with any trade, plumbing tools continue to evolve and improve to the benefit of everyone working in the p-h-c field. Ergonomic tools designed to support the body and knees should be seriously considered if you plan on plumbing for years to come. Remember, once physical damage has been done to your back or knees, it may affect the level of discomfort you experience on a daily basis when doing future plumbing projects.

\* Bureau Of Labor Statistics / U.S. Department Of Labor: Ref. 2003 BLS Tables # 11, R2, R6, R50, R65,

About the author: Robert Bennette is president of Bennette Design Group, Inc. which specializes in the design and manufacture of ergonomic tools and accessories for professional tradesmen.

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