

Safety Services Monthly Safety Spotlight, June/July 2011

Summertime Safety for Home and Family

Careless Chris: Fearless Weekend Warrior

Fictitious employee Careless Chris had passed the winter months working on an elaborate plan to develop his back yard. He had spent many hours watching home improvement programs filled with design ideas for all kinds of exotic features.

After extensive online research, Chris created a staged project plan. The construction would begin with a new retaining wall made from natural stone. Materials list in hand, Chris made the rounds of big-box stores and specialty supply vendors. "This will be the best investment I've ever made," he told himself as he paid for pallets of stone. Before long, however, Chris would come to realize his "best investment" would turn out to be something entirely different!

Back at home, Careless Chris took great satisfaction in unpacking and setting up his new tools, work gloves, measuring and leveling devices and how-to books. He borrowed a wheelbarrow from his neighbor and transported twenty bags of gravel from his carport to the back yard. He took a "before" picture and then marked the outline of the new wall with stakes.

The next day, Chris began digging out the area for the wall. He shoveled for two hours before taking a lunch break. His back had begun to hurt now and then, but he was determined to dig all the way across the length of the wall. He was inspired with thoughts of the graceful gardens he had seen on home improvement shows. After lunch, he resumed digging.

The next day, Chris's back was stiff and sore when he got up. Undeterred, he took some over-the-counter pain medicine and got to work. He spread the gravel out and tacked landscaping cloth over it. "No time like the present," he said as he considered the two pallets of football-sized rocks. He filled the wheelbarrow, rolled the load over the work area and dumped it out. He returned for a second load. It was then that he spotted a particularly interesting boulder lower down in the pallet. He moved a few of the rocks aside and put his hands around the boulder. He had to twist and lean over to get a good grip. He took a deep breath and lifted with all his might.

That moment was a turning point for Chris and what remained of his summer. By twisting and lifting using his already sore back, Chris seriously injured his back. The pain was intense and immediate. He made his way slowly and painfully into the house and called a friend to take him to the doctor.



As the day wore on, Careless Chris became tired and his back started to hurt, but he was caught up in a do-it-yourself fervor and continued with his hard work – until it was too late.

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The doctor informed Chris that he was very lucky not to have done even more damage with his irresponsible lifting behavior. Chris would need a week off work and months of physical therapy to recover from the injury. During his recovery, Chris learned a lot about injury prevention through proper lifting and material handling procedures. First, he learned that doing a few gentle stretches before, during and after his work greatly lessens the risk of injury.

Chris also learned that before lifting, he should have positioned himself close to and squarely in front of the boulder, or better yet, gotten assistance from his neighbor. He also should have placed his feet shoulder-distance apart and bent his knees to lift using his leg muscles rather than twisting and bending at the waist. Another lesson: knowing that after a winter of not exercising, spending two days digging and hauling was highly likely to result in discomfort and injury.

It seems Chris's "best investment" should have been focusing at least as much on safety as it did on a prize-winning outdoor design. As it is, his new tools and equipment are put away for the summer and the materials are still piled in his carport. He will try again next summer, only next time he'll rely on proper work procedures for a safe and enjoyable experience.