

Q&A

As Maryland's leader and expert in workers' compensation insurance, IWIF professionals are available by phone, e-mail and in person to help answer any questions you may have. We also encourage you to contact your agent partner and to visit our website for more frequently asked questions and answers.

Q. What interventions, pre- and post-injury, are important in the medical care of and recovery from an injury in an aging workforce?

A. Older workers bring specialized skills and talents to an organization. If they are injured at work, their injuries are best addressed by early intervention that focuses on managing both the injury and underlying disease or chronic illness. This also includes identifying available psychosocial support, family

resources, and setting rehabilitation goals to achieve a safe return to work. Although an older worker experiences fewer injuries than a younger worker, the recovery period may be prolonged as a result of chronic disease, normal aging processes, and health habits that do not optimize one's health status. Important to injury prevention and recovery is engaging in lifestyle activities and preventive care measures that reduce risk factors and enhance the capacity for recovery and return to work.

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Rehabilitation starts at the time of injury and the plan may include physical or occupational therapy, programs that maximize function such as work hardening programs, durable medical equipment or other assistive devices, and management of non-related medical conditions. Furthermore, older workers may not have the available family and social support in place like younger workers. In fact, the workplace may be their only social support. It may be necessary to evaluate the home environment to identify those at risk for falling so that accommodations within one's limitations can be made. If medically indicated, home physical therapy and skilled nursing can provide additional support until outpatient services can be assumed.

The employee may be encouraged to seek care with his/her primary care provider to better manage other unrelated illnesses that may complicate recovery, if left unmanaged. Important to achieving an uneventful recovery and rehabilitation is the education provided by health professionals.

Most important is to create a work environment that supports the special needs of the older worker, from considering temporary modification of work activities to encouraging participation in healthy lifestyle activities.

With injury, it is critical to understand the aging process and causation in order to distinguish work-related injuries from aches and pains of the normal aging process. Once causation is established, early intervention involves working with the employee, employer, and medical community to assist in coordinating appropriate and prompt medical care, and establishing the rehabilitation plan for an early return to work. Nurse Case Managers play a part in communicating with the employee in assessing medical conditions, health habits, and psychosocial issues.

It is common for older injured employees to take medications to treat an injury as well as for pre-existing medical conditions. Better medication management improves compliance and reduces the risk of drug side effects and complications.

Disability management is an important intervention that begins with an assessment early in the injury. When returning to the workforce, it is important for the employee and employer to work together to achieve a safe and timely resumption of work activities.

Job accommodations may need to be considered along with implementation of a transitional work program that allows the older worker more time to progress toward resuming full work duties. In other situations, Vocational Rehabilitation Services may assist the employee in returning to the workforce.

Most important is to create a work environment that supports the special needs of the older worker, from considering temporary modification of work activities to encouraging participation in healthy lifestyle activities. It's never too late to get healthy.

Here are some basic reminders for general health and wellness for the older working adult:

- Eat a healthier diet.
- Participate in regular physical activity and exercise.
- Maintain a healthy body weight.
- Do not smoke.
- Limit alcohol.
- Get regular preventive health screenings (bone density, cholesterol, cervical, mammogram, colonoscopy, prostate).
- Get regular medical check-ups, including eye and hearing examinations.
- See your doctor for flu and pneumonia vaccinations.
- Ensure good oral hygiene and regular dental care.
- Learn relaxation techniques.
- Manage sleep and fatigue.
- Use over-the-counter and prescribed medications correctly and responsibly.
- Utilize mental health services when needed.

Q. What can I do to help prevent and minimize back injuries for my aging workforce?

A. The application of generally accepted safe lifting techniques needs to be communicated and demonstrated safely and regularly to all your workers, including your older workers. These include:

1. For older workers, reduce substantially the physical requirements for lifting, pulling and reaching. Break down materials that need lifting into small amounts. Utilize lifting devices and equipment and encourage team lifting as much as possible.

2. Avoid bending and twisting at the waist while lifting. Holding the object close to the body in the mid-thigh to mid-chest area while lifting is the preferred method. Don't twist. Turn the entire body after the lift to deliver or place the object.

3. Avoid overhead and above-the-shoulder lifting. Outstretched and overhead lifts place a huge stress on the shoulders, rotator cuffs, arms and back. Lower the material to the mid-thigh, mid-chest area.



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These are just a few of the suggested safety measures for safe lifting. For more information, contact your IWIF Loss Control consultant and visit iwif.com.

 Please visit IWIF.com for additional frequently asked questions and answers.