

Ergonomics in Material Handling Industries

There is more to ergonomics than getting a good office chair. All workers in all industries are vulnerable to injury due to poor ergonomics and repetitive stress on the body. These injuries may not be fatal, but they can result in chronic injury, missed days of work and reduced productivity.

During an average work day, many workers are responsible for manual material handling, specifically the physical moving of individual containers by lifting, lowering, filling, emptying, or carrying them. This type of work contributes to a large percentage of over half a million cases of musculoskeletal disorders reported annually in the U.S.

Musculoskeletal disorders often involve strains and sprains to the lower back, shoulders, and upper limbs. They can result in protracted pain, disability, medical treatment, and financial stress for those afflicted with them, and employers often find themselves paying the bill, either directly or through workers' compensation insurance.

Manual handling of containers may expose workers to physical conditions that can lead to injuries, wasted energy, and wasted time. To avoid these problems, your organization can directly benefit from improving the fit between the demands of work tasks and the capabilities of your workers. Remember that workers' abilities to perform work tasks may vary because of differences in age, physical condition, strength, gender, stature, and other factors. In short, changing your workplace by improving the fit can benefit your workplace by:

- Reducing or preventing injuries.
- Reducing workers' efforts by decreasing forces in lifting, handling, pushing, and pulling materials.

- Reducing risk factors for musculoskeletal disorders (e.g., awkward postures from reaching into containers).
- Increasing productivity, product and service quality, and worker morale.
- Lowering costs by reducing or eliminating production bottlenecks, error rates or rejects, use of medical services because of musculoskeletal disorders.
- Workers' compensation claims, excessive worker turnover, absenteeism, and retraining.

Observe how different workers perform the same tasks to get ideas for improving work practices or organizing the work. Then consider the following improvements:

- Alternate heavy tasks with light tasks.
- Provide variety in jobs to eliminate or reduce repetition (i.e., overuse of the same muscle groups).
- Adjust work schedules, work pace, or work practices.
- Provide recovery time (e.g., short rest breaks).
- Modify work practices so that workers perform work within their power zone (i.e., above the knees, below the shoulders, and close to the body).
- Rotate workers through jobs that use different muscles, body parts, or postures.

Training alone is not an ergonomic improvement. Instead, it should be used together with any workplace changes made. Workers need training and hands-on practice with new tools, equipment, or work practices to make sure they have the skills necessary to work safely. Training is most effective when it is interactive and fully involves workers.

(Source: NIOSH, CDS, MHIA)

The Importance of Closing Cases

The overall cost of a Workers' Comp injury or illness is related to the length of the medical treatment and the reserves set aside by your insurance carrier. The question is how you, as an employer, can you better manage these costs.

One effective way to manage a case is to get the case closed as soon as possible. Sometimes when an employee is treating with a medical clinic and is nearing the end of treatment, the patient does not show up for his/her final visit. The case remains open because the patient has not been medically discharged.

At HealthFirst Medical when a patient does not show up for his/her appointment, a no show letter is sent to the patient and to the employer. Often an employee will tell the employer that he/she feels fine and does not need an further medical treatment. To ensure that the case is closed by your insurance carrier, you should instruct the patient to return to the clinic for the final visit and discharge.

If after repeated tries of getting your employee to go to the clinic for discharge, you may call HealthFirst and request that your employee be given an administrative discharge. At that time HealthFirst will discharge the patient on paper and notify your carrier to close the case. There is always a possibility that the case may be reopened if the employee realizes his injury is not resolved.



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Protect Your Employees From the Flu

Once again flu season is just around the corner. The best way to protect you and your employees from the flu is to offer them flu injections at the workplace. Getting a flu vaccination is the single best way of preventing influenza according to the Center for Disease Control.

The CDC recommends getting a flu vaccination in October or November before the flu season hits. But getting vaccinated in December, or even later, will still be beneficial in most years.

HealthFirst Medical Group will be giving flu vaccinations starting in the early part of October provided we receive our order from our suppliers. The cost of the flu shot will be \$20 again this year. We have a limited supply of injections, **so please call the marketing assistant at (562) 926-3440 x313 or (562) 949-9328 x206** to reserve your shots and schedule a date. Don't let the flu catch your employee unprotected.

