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BY TERENCE MILFORD

Putting Your Employees in the Best Position to Keep Workers' Comp Costs Down

Ergonomics is the science of fitting the right jobs to the right people, based on physical ability and other characteristics relevant to a specific job. By doing this correctly, you can avoid a myriad of injuries and associated workers' compensation costs.

Proper ergonomics initiatives can lead to increased productivity, a decrease in injury and illness, reduced fatigue, increased job satisfaction and more.

In 2002, a survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor reported that employees suffering from repetitive stress injuries incurred in the workplace took a median of 23 days off work, while those who experienced a slip, fall or trip took 7, and those exposed to harmful substances took just 3.

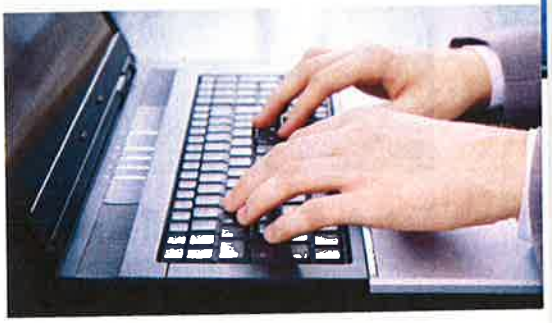
Ergonomics and the impact on workers' compensation claims not only is found in the office or in manufacturing jobs. In 2007, NIOSH reported that of the workers' compensation claims made across the construction industry, 32 percent of injuries could have been prevented by heeding proper ergonomic procedures. The cost of the average claim was $9,240. The same report also points out that repetitive stress injuries (RSI) cost U.S. employers over $1 billion per year.

By taking concise actions, the benefits of proper ergonomics are bountiful, leading to high productivity, avoidance of illness and injury risks such as musculoskeletal disorders (MSD), less fatigue, a reduction in error rates and increased job satisfaction for workers.

EDUCATION

It's all about education and training, and advising employers about how to put their employees in the proper "position" will avoid injuries and, in turn, costly workers' compensation claims.

Let's take for example office workers. It only takes 4 to 5 minutes to properly evaluate if a person's body positioning at an office workstation is leading down the path towards a potential injury. It's all about the proper height of the monitor and keyboard; the positioning of the keyboard is paramount in preventing carpal tunnel syndrome, and the height of the monitor, in relation to eye level, is what reduces back and shoulder strain. And unless you're hiring Gumby, make sure employees are facing their workstation head on instead of twisting their lower torso awkwardly. Office workers shouldn't have to be contortionists to get their job done.



Another area to look at in the office is the telephone. There's nothing like sticking a phone in the crook of your neck for 2 hours to cause a muscle revolt. Make the call to invest in a good headpiece system for your employees and you'll save money down the road. Here are some additional tips:

- Lower the height of the chair so the employee's back touches the back of the chair.
- Make sure feet rest firmly on the floor, slightly in front of the employee.
- Make sure the keyboard is centered directly in front of the monitor and the computer tool bar is at eye level.

- Make sure the mouse and keyboard are at the edge of the desk.
- Remind employees to avoid gripping the mouse when it's not being used.
- Be sure to re-evaluate workstations each year; people's bodies change, and/or they may develop bad habits when it comes to posture, chair position, etc.

Another key is stretching and warming muscles before and during work.

I worked with a bus company in Iowa that reported more than 100 injuries per year due to carpal tunnel because of the repetition of the job. By instituting a program of stretching exercises in both the morning and afternoon, we saw an immediate drop in repetitive injuries in the first 3-6 months, and eventually got the injuries down to a couple of claims per year (none of them surgical). This saved the client considerable money. The inherent risks to improper ergonomics can be traced back to what I call the "2-Hour Rule":

- Continually repeating a motion for 2 hours.
- Lifting a specific weight for 2 hours.
- Being in an awkward position for 2 hours.
- Subject to vibration for 2 hours.

It now is commonplace for managerial teams in many companies to require periodic breaks for employees whose jobs require repetitive motion.

STARTING OUT ON THE RIGHT FOOT(WEAR)

Sometimes, the problem can be found in the local shoe store. A health care provider working with elderly and disabled patients was finding an alarming number of leg and ankle injuries among employees. It turns out the majority of the workers were doing their jobs with improper footwear, opting for flip-flops, Crocs and in some cases, stiletto heels instead of appropriate (and more practical) shoes. Ankle sprains were just waiting to happen.

Proper ergonomics in the workplace go far beyond working at a desk or wearing the correct shoes. According to OSHA, "Common examples of ergonomic risk factors are found in jobs requiring repetitive, forceful or prolonged exertions of the hands; frequent or heavy lifting, pushing, pulling or carrying of heavy objects; and prolonged awkward postures. Vibration and cold may add risk to these work conditions. Jobs or working conditions presenting multiple risk factors will have a higher probability of causing a musculoskeletal problem. The level of risk depends on the intensity, frequency, and duration of the exposure to these conditions and the individuals' capacity to meet the force of other job demands that might be involved." EHS

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