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Reducing Back Injury Claims

by

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Back injury claims are by far the most common and the most costly workers' compensation claims for many companies. Various studies have put the frequency of back claims at 25% to 32% of all workers' compensation claims, exceeding every other type of occupational injury. The problem of back injuries crosses all industry lines. Whether your company is involved in manufacturing, wholesale distribution, retail, construction, healthcare, a service business, or an office environment, back injuries are likely to be the most vexing of your compensation claims.

Over the past 50 years a wide variety of solutions have been tried by safety professionals and others to reduce the number and severity of back injuries. Some of the solutions used have been: training in proper lifting techniques, films/videos/brochures, "Back Schools", pre-employment strength testing and/or x-rays, back supports (back belts), exercise programs, ergonomic design of workstations, providing mechanical lifting devices, medical and claim management, etc. Despite these efforts, back injury claims continue to be a problem. Some of these solutions have been shown to be at least somewhat effective while others have been discredited and shown to have little or no effect on reducing injuries.

The question is can back injuries be "prevented". The answer is "yes" and "no". It is currently felt that preventing all occupational back injuries is not possible. In many cases there is no clear connection between the symptoms and the work or activity engaged in by the employee. Since studies have shown that a significant proportion of the population (60% to 80%) will experience low back pain at some point in their working lifetime, it is likely that in some cases the physician will relate the pain to the employee's work activity and we cannot determine what we could have done to prevent the injury. This does not necessarily mean that the physician is wrong or that the pain or injury was not caused by the work activity.

On the other hand, it is clear that many occupational back injuries can be prevented. Some companies manage to have a very low frequency of back injury claims while another company in the same business and with the same exposures will have a serious problem with back injury claims. What is the difference?

Companies that have the back injury problem under control tend to use a comprehensive or multifaceted approach. They do not rely on one solution or approach. They don't look for a quick or easy fix like "back

belts" or an exercise program. They look at the causes of past injuries and at the potential causes of back injuries in their workplace and they eliminate or reduce the exposures as much as possible.

Some of the strategies that I have found to be the most effective when used in combinations with one another are:

Analyze past losses and potential loss causes:

Review the back injury claims that your company has had over the past five years. Determine what caused the injury, if you can, and take action to eliminate or reduce the exposure. In some cases you won't be able to determine a cause or a corrective action. That's OK, work on those that you can. Take a close look at all manual lifting, carrying, and handling tasks in your workplace, determine what the potential loss causes are and take action to reduce or eliminate those exposures.

Eliminate or reduce manual lifting & carrying, as much as possible:

Much of the manual handling, lifting and carrying in any operation could be eliminated. Your goal should be to eliminate it whenever possible. If employees don't have to handle, lift or carry materials, they are less likely to suffer a back injury or other musculoskeletal injury. In some cases it is as simple as providing a hand truck or cart, having materials delivered to the location where they will be used instead of unnecessarily moving them multiple times, reducing the size of a tote or bin, storing the object at waist level instead of on the floor, etc. Many solutions will be low cost or no cost. In some cases it may require a more costly solution such as providing mechanical lifting equipment (hoists, lift tables, conveyors, etc.) or automating the process.

Design jobs and storage practices to reduce exposures:

Learn basic ergonomic principles and design the jobs in your workplace to eliminate the risk factors such as repeated bending at the waist, high frequency of lifting, excessively heavy lifting, lifting and twisting the back at the same time, reaching above shoulder level, reaching out at arms length to lift an object, etc. Design storage areas and storage practices to reduce manual lifting and handling to a minimum. Much of the "improper lifting" that we blame employees for is caused by improper design of the workstation or the way we store things.

Teach proper material handling techniques:

Although teaching of proper lifting techniques has not been shown over the years to have much, if any, effect on reducing back injuries, it is still an important part of any comprehensive program. The instruction should not be limited to "how to lift properly" but should include instruction on when not to lift, getting help when necessary, suggesting ways to eliminate lifting/handling, how and when to use mechanical lifting aids/devices, basic ergonomic principles and risk factors, etc.

Manage claims and medical treatment:

Since we will probably not be able to prevent all back injuries, it is important to manage the claims that we have and to control the medical treatment to keep costs as low as possible. All claims should be investigated carefully to determine whether they are actually work-related and to determine the cause(s). Just because an employee has low back pain does not mean that it was caused by the work activity. If there does not seem to be any connection with the work activity, let the physician know this immediately, before he or she decides

that it is work related. Once they make that determination, it is difficult, if not impossible, to change the decision.

Utilize managed care intervention in the medical treatment if that is permitted in your state. In any event, your claims handler should be involved in questioning any unnecessary treatment or treatment that is not improving the injured worker's condition. Have an aggressive Return-To-Work program and get claimants back to modified duty as soon as medically possible. Work with the physician to get an early return-to-work release to full or modified duty.

Improve your employee relations:

This is critical. A study was done a number of years ago on a large population of workers at one company that concluded that the best predictors (other than having had a prior back injury) of whether an employee would have a work-related back injury claim were "I hate my job" and "I hate my supervisor". In my experience, the relationship between the employer and the employees is one of the main differences between companies with little or no back injury problems and companies with serious problems. Since a majority of workers are likely to experience back pain at some point in their working lifetime as noted above, there is a significant difference between back injuries or pain and back claims. Many workers will experience back pain and continue working without making a claim and the pain will subside naturally as it does in most cases with no treatment. However, a dissatisfied worker who has the same pain will be more likely to relate it to his or her work and will file a workers' compensation claim. The more dissatisfied the worker is the more likely that the claim will not be resolved quickly.

In summary, the goal of completely eliminating back injury claims from your workplace is probably not a realistic one. You can, however, significantly reduce the frequency and the severity of the claims by taking the actions discussed in this article. Take a comprehensive approach and don't rely on only one course of action or look for quick fixes.

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