

Medical Management of Back Injuries

In spite of management efforts to prevent back injuries, some may still occur. When they do, it is important that the management team reacts quickly and knowledgeably to control costs.

Historically, a small percentage of employee injuries account for a very high percentage of the total injury costs. One recent study showed that 10% of all employee injuries account for about 70% of the costs. While the percentages may vary, the trend is clear. To control the total cost of employee injuries, the serious injuries must be well managed.

The typical management response to a serious employee injury is to get proper medical attention for the injured employee, investigate the cause of the injury, take necessary corrective measures to prevent recurrence, clean up any other damage, and notify the insurance company of the injury.

Management of the accident costs are given little further thought with reliance on the insurance carrier to control costs. While the insurance carrier will do everything within its ability to control the accident costs, there are post accidents steps which the employer can take that will have a significant impact to help minimize these costs. These include:

- Make sure the injured employee gets expert medical care. Have someone accompany the injured to the emergency room, clinic, or doctor's office.
- Don't discard equipment involved in the accident until after the insurance carrier has advised that it is all right to do so. The equipment may need to be inspected.
- Provide time for other employees who witness the injury to speak with the insurance carrier if necessary.
- Keep the lines of communication open with the injured employee. Make regular contacts by phone with the person.
- Show concern. Call the employee, send flowers, candy or a card. Assist the employee where you can. Make sure the injured employee feels missed.
- Make sure that the employee knows that a job is waiting for him/her, either the former job or another of equal pay.
- If possible, modify the job or put the employee in another "light duty" job to get him/her back to work faster.
- Never accuse an injured employee of malingering. This will probably prolong the period of disability and could encourage the employee to seek an attorney.
- Keep the lines of communication open with the insurance carrier. Keep them advised on contacts with the employee and how things are progressing.

Some musculoskeletal disorders including low back injuries can occur gradually due to prolonged exposure to risk factors rather than being caused by a single event. Early reporting of signs and symptoms is critical to reducing injury costs.

Employees should be trained and educated regarding early signs and symptoms of musculoskeletal disorders including back pain, reporting procedures, causes of these conditions and prevention control measures. This information will facilitate early recognition of a problem before more severe and disabling conditions occur. Safety incentive programs should be reviewed to ensure that they don't discourage early reporting of injuries.

The management team, including front line supervisors, should be educated in these cost control techniques. Be sure to follow-up when a serious injury occurs to make sure these techniques are being used. A closely coordinated effort between the insured and the insurance carrier will assure that employee injury costs are minimized.

Employees with Previous Back Problems

A number of studies have shown that along with a history of smoking, the only other predictor for back injuries is a previous back injury. Consequently, employees who have experienced back pain or have had back injuries should be closely monitored to ensure that any recurrence of back problems is identified at the earliest stages. Engineering and/or administrative controls should be implemented to reduce the risk factors for back injury for employees with a high potential for further injury.

Lifestyle is an important factor relating to low back pain. The typical back-pain candidate is:

- Overweight
- 30-59 years old
- Sits for most of the day
- Not in peak physical condition
- Once-a-week athlete

Programs designed to increase wellness, employee fitness and exercise can help reduce these risk factors for back injury.

Back Treatment Red Flags

There are a number of red flags during back treatment that indicate a potential for high costs or prolonged lost time. These include:

- Employee requires bed rest
- Pain or tingling in the lower extremities
- Pain medication is taken for more than a month
- There are no improvements in symptoms for more than a month
- Previous back problems or back surgery
- Employee changes doctors frequently
- Employee doesn't follow doctor's orders
- Employee is obese

Special emphasis should be made in evaluating and controlling job related risk factors, in claims management, and dealing with transitional return-to-work for cases involving any of these red flags.