

Employment

Back Pain is Almost as Prevalent as the Common Cold.

There are some schools of thought that regard back pain as a "vicissitude of life", that is a condition which comes and goes through out life like the common cold or headaches. Most people have at least one bout of lower back pain in their life.

Ability to cope and overcome pain differs between individuals at various times in their life. A person's ability to cope is largely dictated by their psychosocial environment. Psychosocial factors refer to an injured employee's psychological state or interactions with their social environment, including work. The evidence clearly indicates that ignoring psychosocial factors (for example, a person's home life, work relationships, social interactions, and financial problems) and leaving them unmanaged can lead to poor outcomes for the injured worker. International research confirms that it makes good business sense for employers to be part of the employee's support system. This means showing empathy not sympathy.

When employees complain of back pain at work, many assume that it is a work related injury. They seek advice from a GP and further investigation, which often shows that there are changes in their spine. This legitimises a diagnosis and a reason for the experienced pain. As people age there are normal degenerative (wear and tear) changes that occur in the spine and these may be evident upon investigation (X-ray or Magnetic Resonance Imaging), with or without any symptoms including pain.

Back Injuries - When Do They Heal?

Non specific low back pain is extremely common. It is the most common type of back injury that we see in workers compensation. No one knows exactly what causes low back pain.

Once a serious back injury has been excluded, the management of acute low back pain should be based on reassurance, pain relief and maintenance of normal activities, including an early return to work. Those who play sport know that low back pain and rest can be a recipe for delayed recovery. Even those with sciatic pain (caused by a protruding disc) benefit from active movement and vigorous (as possible) exercise.

Fortunately most back strain and sprain injuries recover within 4 to 6 weeks. For more significant injuries such as fractures or disc injury to the lumbo-sacral spine, they should not take more than 12 weeks to heal (even if they require surgery).

When a Claim is Submitted ...

If a worker's compensation claim is lodged, then the employer needs to create a sense of urgency. Return to work is an emergency. Often there is delay and by the time a claim is lodged with the insurer the recovery time for acute back pain may have long passed. Within this period proactive workplace and clinical interventions may be compromised as abnormal treatment and employer responses may have become firmly entrenched.

Return to Work Management

It was less than 10 years ago that medical professionals were advising injured employees with back pain to take time off work and rest. We now know that this advice is incorrect and harmful. Back pain improves more rapidly if the person continues as much as possible with normal activity, including continuing to work in a workplace that is supportive and responsive.

For back pain there is good evidence to support the following:

- Reassurance of a positive outcome (as it is a very benign condition!)
- Maintenance of normal activity including work
- Simple analgesics for pain relief
- Manipulation by a skilled therapist (first 4-6 weeks if required)
- Return to work as soon as possible (suitable alternative or modified duties)
- Activity based interventions as soon as possible after injury
- Upgrading of duties in a planned fashion

There is little evidence to support:

- Acupuncture
- Bed rest more than 2 days
- Bed rest with traction
- Passive physical modalities beyond the first 12 weeks
- Trigger point injections

SANO provide expert assistance and advice to MGAV members on workers' compensation management. Ring the MGAV if you have problems requiring this assistance.



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