



Helping to make your workplace a safe place  
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## ISSUE HIGHLIGHTS:

### THE AGING WORKFORCE

In our last newsletter we addressed issues an employer may face with Inexperienced Workers. In this issue we are looking at the opposite end of the spectrum.

With Americans living longer they are also working longer, making older workers an invaluable part of any company. They bring wisdom, knowledge and experience to many aspects of business and the workplace. They can become mentors for younger and less experienced workers.

However, there are certain changes that occur to both the body and mind of every individual as they age, which can affect safety in the workplace if an employer is unaware of them and does not take steps to keep aging workers safe.

(See full article at right and continued on pages 2 & 3)

Some changes that occur as the worker ages can include loss of former strength and muscular flexibility; range of motion becomes limited; loss of sense of balance; deterioration of vision; and the mind and thinking processes react more slowly. All these changes can have an impact on safety in the workplace.

### Muscular

As muscles lose mass they also lose strength, making them respond more slowly and tire more quickly. To insure safety on the workplace after the loss of strength and muscular flexibility, older workers should practice certain safety measures.

- *Avoid keeping the muscles in a fixed posture or performing only one kind of movement.*
- *Avoid twisting the torso while lifting to reduce back injuries.*
- *Keep work activity in the "neutral" zone, the area between the thighs and the shoulders.*
- *Step up close to objects to be lifted and keep them close to the body.*
- *Avoid prolonged bending, particularly below knee level.*
- *Lift objects from waist level.*
- *Use a mechanical lifting aid or get help with heavy objects.*
- *Avoid repetitive tasks by incorporating job rotation.*
- *Avoid prolonged standing or sitting.*
- *If prolonged standing is necessary, use anti-fatigue mats.*
- *Avoid extreme demands on the joints.*
- *Exercise 30 minutes a day to keep fit and flexible. Start with ten-minute intervals.*



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## Balance

Older workers may find that they have a problem with balance. Inner ear problems and a tendency to deafness in one ear can also lead to problems with balance. This may be the reason why older people experience more falls and broken bones. Slips and falls account for 14% of the 40% of non-fatal occupational injuries. Injuries involving falls are more common to older workers. Older workers can take certain safety measures to ensure safety in the workplace when there may be a balance loss.

- *Perform strength and balance training to maintain the sense of balance.*
- *Exercise in a swimming pool to provide a reduced weight bearing environment. This can be especially helpful.*
- *Avoid marble, polished wood, and tile flooring if possible and wear good fitting footwear with non-slip soles.*

Employers can apply safety practices in the workplace to prevent falls and other significant injuries to older workers and other employees. These include:

- *Maintain all walking surfaces in good condition.*
- *Match work with abilities. Some older workers are at risk if required to use ladders or scaffolds.*
- *Practice good housekeeping and keep walkways clear and free of obstructions.*
- *Clean spills immediately.*
- *Avoid equipment that obstructs vision, especially peripheral vision.*
- *Use high contrast colors and non-slip surfaces on risers and treads on stairs.*
- *Use bright lighting and provide handrails.*
- *Minimize background noises to accommodate hearing problems.*
- *Avoid creating locations that have echoes.*

## Respiratory

Respirator functions decline from 10-25% from age 20 to age 65. Oxygen uptake sharply declines after the age of 50, making intense physical activity more difficult for older workers. Older workers should practice safety when performing their duties and other physical activities in the workplace.

- *Avoid strenuous work in hot/humid or cold environments.*
- *Reduce exposure to temperature extremes.*
- *Take precautions to avoid dehydration in hot environments.*
- *Avoid physically demanding work if the worker is not conditioned for such work.*
- *Take frequent breaks.*
- *Allow for self-paced work rather than machine-paced work.*



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## Circulatory

Circulatory problems affect people as they age, causing them to feel cold and heat more acutely. In the summer time, employers are aware that outside workers need more water and rest breaks to cope with heat stress. These precautions especially apply to the older worker, since age, weight and medications often interfere with body functions that naturally cool the body. In the winter, employers should protect workers against low temperatures, dampness, cold water, and wind conditions. Hazard abatement should be an employer's first choice in worker protection, followed by protective equipment for all workers, not simply the older workers.

## Mental

Certain mental processes do tend to decline with aging. Studies have shown that the greatest mental abilities occur in the 30's and 40's and then start to minimally decline in the late 50's and early 60's, but only to a small extent. Not until after the early 80's do 30-40% of people experience a significant decline in their mental capacity.

Mental processing and reaction time does slow with age and older people will take longer to process mental tasks than their younger co-workers. Given enough time, older workers can perform mental tasks just as well as their younger counterparts. It is important to note that changes in physical conditions and mental ability do not happen to everyone as they age.

There is a wide variety in ability among aging individuals and since functional decline is small it should not interfere with normal day-to-day tasks. Older workers may take longer to learn new tasks, but they are still capable of learning new things.

## Vision

Vision begins to deteriorate for many people in their forties sometimes requiring prescription glasses to correct eye problems. Workers may need prescription safety glasses in their jobs. Employers can protect older workers with vision problems by making adjustment in the workplace.

- *Improve contrast between objects by increasing existing lighting.*
- *Install glare screens on computers to prevent eyestrain.*
- *Avoid shades of blue, blue on green or blue on black in the work environment. Older workers may have difficulty in distinguishing between these colors.*
- *Use signs that are clear and easily seen and easy to read.*
- *Eliminate the need for older workers to constantly move between bright areas and shady/dim areas.*
- *Reduce glare by using shades, awning, and indirect light.*
- *Encourage workers to get their eyes checked regularly.*

Information attained from MySafetyPoint.com  
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