



Keeping Older Workers Healthy and Productive

It's finally happened: The huge baby boom generation has reached middle age. And as they age, the number of older Americans will increase and dominate the workforce. Within the decade, the number of workers in the 55-and-older group is projected to grow by nearly 50 percent, four times the growth for the overall labor force.¹

The millions of American employees who are 55+ bring a wealth of skills, wisdom and experience to the workplace. But they also create challenges for employers who wish to maintain employee health and productivity while controlling health insurance and workers' compensation costs.

Health insurance costs rise significantly as workers age. The cost for health insurance for 55- to 59-year-olds can be more than double that for 20- to 44-year-olds.² With most baby boomers planning on working past the age of 65, employers will have to contend with costly workplace injuries and age-related health problems.³

Health Issues for Older Employees

As people age, it is inevitable that they will lose some strength, flexibility and coordination. Although older workers experience fewer injuries with less frequency overall than younger counterparts, their injuries tend to be more severe and their recovery time may be longer.

They may also have pre-existing health problems and conditions—co-morbidities—that can contribute to future workplace injuries and claims costs. Arthritis, for example, may be aggravated by repetitive or fine motor activities, and make injury on the job more likely.

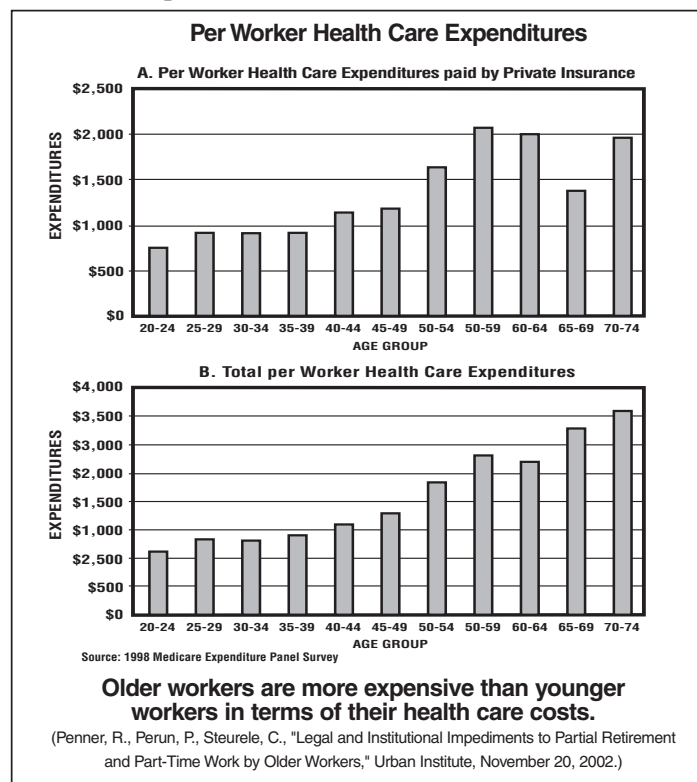
Older employees' health issues may include the following:

- Vision deteriorates with age, and older workers who spend hours looking at a computer screen may experience eyestrain. Visual tasks such as reading and inspecting material for long periods of time affect head and neck movements that trigger a forward curvature of the spine. This increases a person's risk for arthritic changes in the neck that may result in pain and fatigue.
- Balance problems related to vision impairment, decreased muscle strength and effects of arthritis increase the risk of falls. Injury due to falls is one of the most common injuries for older workers.
- Medical conditions such as hypertension, osteoporosis and coronary artery disease are more prevalent as individuals age. Employees with chronic conditions use significantly more health services than the average person, and incur high costs in lost productivity for their employers.

Rehab Remedies

Rehabilitation therapists provide solutions for employers who want to keep their older workers healthy and productive, and prevent simple injuries from progressing to chronic disabilities. Some of these solutions include:

Continued on other side.



Continued from front side.

- **Wellness programs.** Rehab therapists who specialize in wellness offer exercise programs geared to the needs and limitations of participants. Regular exercise helps prevent heart disease, arthritis, osteoporosis, diabetes, and other ailments.
- **Fall prevention programs.** Geriatric physical therapists use balance training and other techniques to help people avoid falls. In addition, they advise employers on creating a safer work environment, e.g., removing tripping hazards and installing grab bars.
- **Injury prevention and treatment.** Industrial physical therapists assess and match a worker's capabilities with the demands of the job. They promote safety on the job by educating workers on breaking dangerous habits, such as improper lifting, and help workers learn to move in new ways to avoid re-injury. If employees are hurt on the job, they may need prompt physical therapy to facilitate a safe return to work. Placing injured workers in physical therapy early in the course of treatment is linked to fewer doctor visits, earlier discharge from care, fewer restricted workdays, and fewer days away from work.⁴
- **Post-illness rehabilitation.** Therapists play a major role

1 "2002-12 Employment Projections," Monthly Labor Review, Bureau of Labor Statistics, February 2004.
 2 Penner, R., Perrin, P., Steurle, C., "Legal and Institutional Impediments to Partial Retirement and Part-Time Work by Older Workers," Urban Institute, November 20, 2002.
 3 "American Business and Older Employees—A Summary of Findings," AARP, 2000.
 4 Zigenfus G., Yin Y., Giang G., et al. Effectiveness of early physical therapy in the treatment of acute low back musculoskeletal disorders. J Occup Env Med 2000;42:35-39.

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in the recovery of employees who suffer from serious illnesses, such as cancer, stroke and heart disease. For example, cardiac rehabilitation not only helps heart attack survivors rebuild their cardiovascular condition, it also helps prevent further coronary incidents.

From PTPN, the rehabilitation and workforce productivity experts

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