

CHRONIC DISABILITY

Injured workers with chronic disability are those whose recovery takes longer than expected. There are many factors that may cause a work injury to develop into a chronic disability. These risk factors include the worker's own lifestyle and social situation, as well as conditions of their employment, medical diagnosis and treatment.

Time is the key factor in the development of a chronic disability. The risk of an injured worker becoming chronically disabled increases rapidly over the first six months. Obtaining appropriate health care for the worker within the first few weeks is critical to their recovery.

The WCB is especially concerned about those injured workers who are at risk of becoming, or have become, chronically disabled. Most of these injured workers have more complex and/or severe injuries, or their recovery may have extended beyond the expected time frame. Watching for high-risk indicators (see below), and providing timely health and vocational services, is vital to the prevention of chronic disability.

The following criteria, symptoms and risk factors were identified in the *Report of the Task Force on Early Intervention* prepared for the WCB in 1995.

Criteria

Generally, three criteria determine when early intervention may be required:

- A significant number of risk factors for chronic disability are evident. (See below.)
- The worker does not respond to treatment, or his/her recovery is delayed beyond the period indicated on the recovery timetables. (See Disability Duration Guidelines on our website.)
- There is no diagnosis or treatment plan in place four to six weeks after the injury.

Symptoms

Injured workers may be diagnosed as chronically disabled if, as a result of the injury (not any other recognized condition), they exhibit the following symptoms:

- Diminished or no interest in actively participating in their recovery.
- A negative attitude about returning to work.
- Convinced that they are disabled and that they are entitled to financial benefits, whether they are receiving them or not.
- Have complaints that cannot be verified, and that are out of proportion to the nature or severity of the injury.

Risk Factors for Chronic Disability

In working with a client, Case Managers may recognize personal and behavioural factors that may affect the client's ability to focus on returning to work. Studies show that workers, who exhibit a number of the characteristics listed below, may experience a delay in returning to work, holding a job or coping with the physical demands of a job.

Injured Worker

- Age – older workers may have difficulty finding jobs because of their age.
- Place of residence – rural workers may have more difficulty finding other employment if they are unable to return to their pre-injury jobs.
- Education – jobs with fewer educational requirements usually involve more physical activity.
- Opinion as to the degree of disability is out of proportion to the nature of the injury.
- History of drug or alcohol abuse.
- Financial problems reduce the ability to focus on returning to work as a priority.

Injured Worker cont'd

- Family problems such as separation, divorce, serious illness or death.
- Language – English as their second language may limit their ability to find work.
- Lack of mobility – if their spouse has a job in the community, or if they have lived there a long time, they may not want to move and this will limit their ability to find work.
- Injured worker cannot be reached when Case Manager calls or tries to meet with him/her.
- Injured worker relies on a third party (spouse or parent) to communicate with the WCB.
- Injured worker has a significant number of prior claims with the WCB.

Employment

- Employment history – length of employment with employer of record, seasonal work, issued a layoff, uncertainly about having a job to return to.
- Nature of employment – no light duties available, employer small in size.
- History of poor performance on the job – employer doesn't want worker to return to work.
- Excuses for not returning to work – no transportation, unreasonable demand for light duties.
- Little or no contact with employer after injury.
- Rate of compensation provides a sense of security, especially if pre-injury income was uncertain, sporadic or seasonal.
- Dissatisfaction with the job.
- Lack of job opportunities because of economic conditions within usual field of employment.

Medical

- Period of disability exceeds expected recovery time for the injury.
- Injured worker has other medical problems at the same time as the injury.
- Lack of physical findings on medical reports to support a delay in returning to work.
- Injured worker frequently changes primary care providers.
- Past related problems in same body area of the injury.
- Expansion or change in location of symptoms from those of the original injury.
- Injured worker does not participate in treatment, misses appointments, makes excuses for non-attendance, and has only vague recollection of primary care provider's advice.

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