

Avenue II Safety & Health Week Newsletter

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Together we can create safe workplaces and communities

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AGING WORKERS

Canada's population is aging due to longer life expectancy, low birth rates and the aging of the "baby boomers." These facts are having an impact on both the age distribution in the workforce and the size of the retired populations.

There is no exact, commonly recognized age at which someone is considered an older worker. Most studies have focused on people older than 55, while other studies examined those 45 years of age and up.

Aging workers may require some accommodations but a well-designed workplace benefits everyone. Workstations and job tasks that are matched to the needs of the individual worker are always best. Older workers tend to have fewer workplace injuries but when an older worker does get injured they may take longer to heal. Many workplace injuries are the result of doing the same thing again and again. These repetitive motion injuries develop over time. An older worker then may report more musculoskeletal injuries since they have had longer for the condition to develop.



Our bodies change as we gradually age. The changes with age occur in everyone but not necessarily at the same rate. Changes that occur during aging include:

- Muscular strength and range of joint movement. In general people lose approximately 15 to 20% of their strength from the age of 30 to 60. However, every person is different. It must be considered that most jobs do not require a person to use all of their strength. Older workers may be able to perform the same tasks as younger workers but they may be working closer to their maximum limit. The musculoskeletal system weakens in time, resulting in a decreased capacity for load-bearing work. Keep in mind that highly repetitive motions can cause physical problems at any age. As we age the body loses some range of motion and flexibility. Being less flexible or able to reach could cause problems in some unpredictable situations that require unusual or spontaneous movements.
- The ability of the heart, lungs and circulatory system to carry oxygen decreases as we age. Between the age of 30 and 65, the functional breathing capacity can reduce by 40%. These

changes can affect the ability to do extended heavy physical labour and reduce the body's ability to adjust to hot and cold conditions.

- Difficulties with regulation of posture and balance may occur. In general people may find it harder to maintain good posture and balance. When seated or standing it may not be a problem. However, incidents may occur when someone loses their balance.
- As we age our body is not able to regulate sleep as well as it used to. How long a person sleeps, and how well they sleep, can additionally be disrupted by changing work hours or by light and noise. The impact on workers is especially a concern for older shift workers. Use of shift rotations that are least disruptive to sleep patterns is preferred.
- Our bodies are less able to maintain internal temperatures as well as less able to adjust to temperature change. This means that older workers may find heat or cold more difficult to deal with than when they were younger.
- Both vision and hearing change as we age. These changes are normal and part of the aging process.
- Changes in mental capacity also occur as a person ages. Older people may not think as clearly as they once did. It may take longer to learn a new skill. Generally speaking, fluid intelligence such as reasoning, attention, dual task activities and information processing declines with age, while verbal tasks and vocabulary remain constant or improve. Tasks that depend on short term memory usually take longer. Older workers may find it difficult to work in a busy environment where a lot is going on. They may be less able to focus attention on information relevant to the task at hand, especially in new situations.
- Training requirements of aged workers vary. Everyone at every age thinks and learns differently. These are dependent on the individual and the experiences they have had during their life.

A workplace can help aging workers by providing a safe workplace that lowers the chance of an injury or occupational illness. These steps include having equipment in good working condition, training and safe work procedures, supportive management styles and risk assessments that take into account the aging worker. Workplaces can also help by having workplace health promotion initiatives such as active living, healthy eating, stress awareness and violence prevention programs.

