



Australian Government

Comcare

Leadership Commitment

EARLY REHABILITATION ASSISTANCE TO EMPLOYEES

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Providing Early Rehabilitation Assistance to Employees

An employer providing rehabilitation, as soon as practicable after an injury, or on the request of an injured employee, sends a strong message that the workplace values the employee's contribution and sets an expectation of early return to work. This rehabilitation assistance need not be contingent on the employee submitting a claim, or the claim being determined by Comcare.

Effective management of ill or injured employees is an essential ingredient in creating a positive employment environment and building business capability. There are also very tangible impacts of not acting early to support a return to work for an injured employees. The longer the injured employees is of work the more likely they are to become chronically ill and stay off work. **“Injured employees who do not return to work within six months have only a 50 percent chance of ever returning to the jobs they held at the time of the injury. If absent for over one year, the chances of an injured employee returning decrease to less than 10 percent.”¹**

In turn, early return to work reduces the human and financial cost associated with workers' compensation claims or other forms of leave.

The cornerstone of effective rehabilitation is ensuring that intervention occurs as soon as practical after injury.

The Benefits of Promoting Early Return to Work Assistance

Early intervention is one of the key better practice principles in the **model of occupational rehabilitation**.

Early intervention has the following benefits:

- Providing a productive and supportive workplace
- Demonstrating management commitment to the employee
- Preventing long term absence from the workplace and the development of chronic illness
- Reducing the adverse effects on co-workers of the injured employee

¹ State Compensation Insurance Fund, California, U.S.A, www.scif.com

- Improving staff confidence and morale
- Increasing management involvement in the injury management process
- Increasing the probability of return to work
- Containing the cost of incapacity and in the long term, the premium
- Reducing the indirect costs to employers such as lost productivity, recruitment and training costs for replacement staff

Injuries in the workplace can be traumatic experiences for employees. As well as the problems associated with the injury or illness, there are often emotional responses of guilt, concerns about the workplace, and worries about long-term health issues.

Senior management commitment and support for early return to work is one of the most important steps that can prevent this scenario. Having in place a good policy of early rehabilitation assistance for all employees, which is well communicated and acted upon consistently, will lead to healthier workplaces and better outcomes for employees and employers.

Delays Lead to Poor Results for All

When a workplace injury occurs, an employee usually reports the injury and medical treatment is sought. Following this, some managers assume the employees will return to work when they are able. This is not good management, and has potential to lead to poor results for injured employees and poor results for organisations.

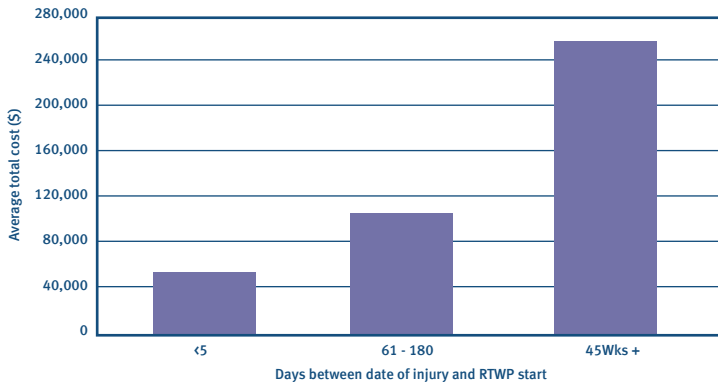
Injury management should commence immediately after an injury occurs. The employer, injured worker and medical practitioner should work together to ensure that the injured employee receives appropriate treatment for their injury, and returns to the workplace as soon as possible.

It is rare to achieve good injury management outcomes through a passive process. The longer an employer waits to become involved, the greater likelihood of a poor outcome for the employee and substantially increased

² Data collected from Commonwealth premium paying agencies for accepted lost time injury claims with a return to work plan, and an injury date between 1 July 1997 and 17 October 2007.

Effect of early commencement of RTWP on average claim costs

(based on 13,283 accepted lost time claims with a return to work plan date of injury between 1 July 1997 and 17 October 2007)



cost in incapacity payments, replacement and retraining costs, medical, insurance and legal bills.

Failing to become involved in the injury management process also has the effect of setting a negative pattern of behaviour and expectations for other employees in relation to future workplace injuries, and overall employee satisfaction.

Comcare data shows the link between delays in providing return to work assistance and claim cost ². It shows that when return to work activity commences more than 12 weeks after the injury, the costs were nearly \$110,000. In contrast, where return to work activity commenced within 5 days of injury, average claim costs were less than half this amount.

Managers Who Act Early Get Results

Comcare research shows that managers' actions have a profound affect on how quickly employees' return to productive work – and how much the employer's overall workers compensation program will cost.³ With management commitment and support, employees can make a smooth transition from injury back to productive duties.

³ *The Impact of Workplace Culture on Return to Work*, Comcare, March 2001, www.comcare.gov.au

Sometimes, an injured employee will be hesitant to return to work for fear of re-injury, pain or discomfort. Leadership commitment to a strong return to work culture can build employee confidence that appropriate action will be taken to support injured employees after an injury.

A lack of early contact and follow up from an employer, can cause an employee to form the impression that their work is not valued, and more importantly, that they are not valued as a person.

A strong return to work culture is critical. Early positive contact and supportive action can readily influence the employee's ability to return to work.

The Key to Success is Management Commitment

The key to success is management commitment. Foster a strong return to work culture, through a policy of early rehabilitation assistance and active support for its implementation. This will shape everyone's expectations to what will happen following a workplace incident or injury.

Managers and Supervisors should always be encouraged to act sooner rather than later. It is important to have safety Key Performance Indicators (KPI) in place as part of performance measurement. The suite of safety KPI should include return to work measures. Include reward and recognition for those Leaders who ensure that injured workers have quick access to rehabilitation services.

Once Senior and Frontline managers demonstrate their commitment to effective return to work policy and action, as part of a larger focus on employee well being, the organisation will be well on the way to preventing and reducing the human and financial cost of workplace injuries.

Good Strategy ... It's Easy

There are three important elements to a successful program of early rehabilitation assistance: sound policy, good communication and effective action.

Sound Policy

The purpose of a rehabilitation policy is to provide a public statement of commitment to managing rehabilitation.

A sound early rehabilitation assistance policy would:

- outline a commitment to monitor unplanned absences and workplace incidents
- outline a process for early contact with employees following incident or injury
- explain how early supportive action to injured employees will be provided
- emphasise the roles and responsibilities of employees, employers and medical practitioners
- establish targets for return to work activity to commence
- ensure that rehabilitation measures are included in manager's performance reporting
- support rehabilitation programs even when an injury or illness is not compensable
- make available employee assistance programs
- commit adequate resources and trained personnel
- be endorsed by senior management and the organisation's health and safety representatives

Good Communication

Having developed the policy make sure that all stakeholders are aware of the policy and how it is implemented. To communicate the policy:

- give safety and rehabilitation a high profile and communicate frequently across the organisation about activities, strategies and performance

- report results at executive level meetings on the timeliness and effectiveness of return to work activities.
- actively inform all employees about what to do if they sustain an injury at work, their rights and responsibilities and how to get support to return to work
- provide training and assistance to managers and supervisors so that they can more effectively implement early return to work support to injured employees
- report and publish on the achievement towards the target to improve the timeliness of return to work activity
- Use posters, videos, noticeboards and newsletters to advertise return to work policies, services and performance.

Effective Action

Sound policy and good communication builds a solid platform for action. Effective early action demonstrates good leadership.

Act early and respond to all workplace incidents regardless of liability status. This means that:

- contact is made with the employee as soon as possible after the injury and that all stakeholders focus on possibilities for the employee to return to work
- line managers must act quickly after an incident or injury to involve case managers or rehabilitation providers
- a safe environment is offered to return to work
- reasonable adjustments are made to the workplace to accommodate the employee's injuries
- line managers must support the return to work process and commit time and resource to this
- all return to work programs are planned coordinated and monitored

- service arrangements with an Approved Rehabilitation Provider (ARP) are developed and monitored
- managers work closely with all stakeholders to ensure that details of the workplace, workforce needs and appropriate suitable duties are well understood

Conclusion

There are many tangible benefits from making a leadership commitment to early return to work. These benefits extend to both the injured worker and the broader work environment. Employees will feel respected and valued. Injured workers will feel supported and have less risk of injury trauma or the development of chronic illness. At a financial level, the provision of early rehabilitation assistance also can reduce lost productivity and the likely costs of workers compensation.

Further Information

Contact:

For further information about how to provide effective and early rehabilitation contact Comcare's Prevention and Injury Management Services on 1300 366 979

Comcare Publications:

Rehabilitation: Managing Return to Work. A better practice guide for managers and supervisors (PUB 16).

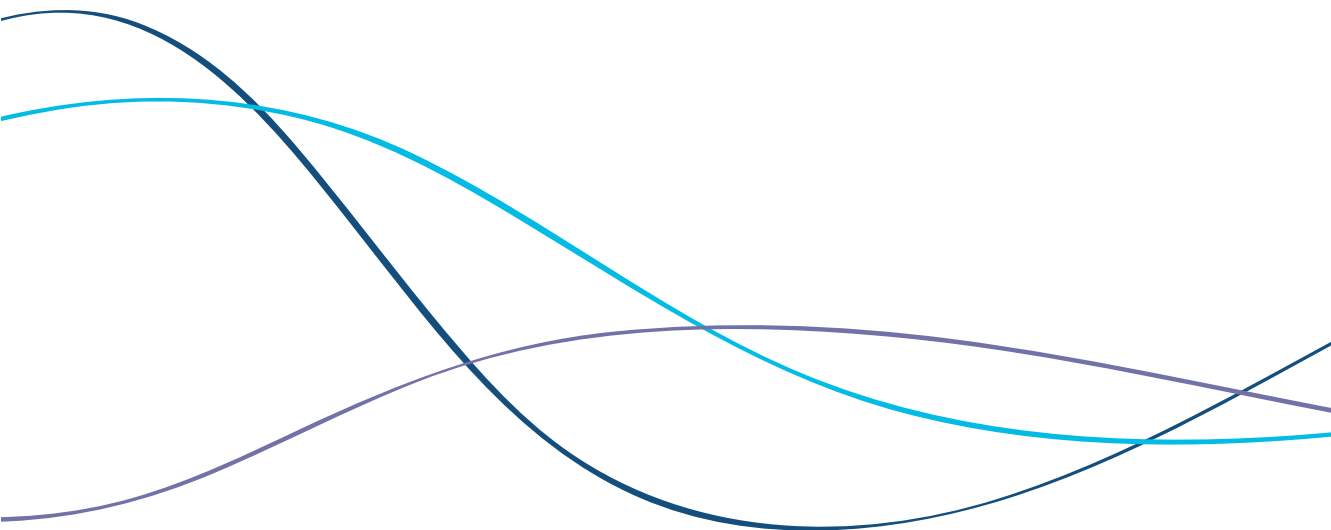
Government Leaders Safety Leaders

Body Stressing Injuries Key Messages to Agency Leaders (PUB 63)

Early intervention: recognition, resolution recovery (PUB 46)

Web:

You can visit the website, www.comcare.gov.au, to access further information and Comcare training programs.





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