



The benefits of returning to work

This information sheet aims to help everyone involved in the injury management process understand why returning to work is so important and what they can do to help injured workers return to work.

Did you know that...

Many people think an injured worker must be off work to recover and that being injured is a barrier to returning to work.

However, you don't have to be fully recovered or to have finished medical treatment before you can return to work. In fact:

- a complete recovery is not often achieved before an injured worker returns to work
- the longer you are away from work, the less chance you have of ever returning.

Why it's so important to return to work

While returning to work is not always easy, it is important to understand that work is generally good for health and wellbeing and that long-term work absence, work disability and unemployment typically have a negative impact on health and wellbeing.

People attempting to return to work after injury or illness face a complex situation with many variables. Good outcomes are more likely when people understand the health benefits of work, and are empowered to take responsibility for their own situation.

What does this mean for you as an injured worker?

Not working can result in loss of self esteem, standing and identity within the community, and a halt to social participation and fulfilment.

An unwarranted delay in returning to work is often associated with delayed recovery. However, in most instances, you don't have to recover completely before returning to work, provided there is a will and there are ways to accommodate the fullest possible restoration of your physical, mental and social functioning.

In other words, your health and wellbeing are improved if you can stay at work during your recovery or return to work as soon as possible if any time off is required.

In specific terms, being out of work long term:

- increases the rate of suicide. In general it increases by six times; for young men out of work for six months or more, the rate of suicide increases 40 times
- is a greater health risk than most dangerous jobs
- can lead to adverse physical, psychological, social and financial effects, which worsen with each passing day.

What you can do to help yourself get back to work after an injury

- Try to stay positive and motivated.
- Recognise that you don't have to be 100% recovered before you return to work.
- Seek advice and explanations about your injury so you can be confident about self managing your recovery.

- Be an active participant in return to work processes.
- Work with your employer to identify suitable duties.
- Suggest ways your work tasks can be modified to accommodate restrictions.
- Work within the restrictions provided by your doctor so you don't risk re-injury.
- Regularly communicate with your employer, especially when away from work. For example, delivering your medical certificate to them in person is one way of staying in touch.
- Make sure you raise any issues or concerns immediately.

What does this mean for employers?

Employers can make a positive contribution to your recovery and wellbeing by:

- providing meaningful alternative duties
- encouraging a supportive workplace culture
- moving beyond merely meeting their legislative requirements for workers compensation and injury management.

Work practices, workplace culture and relationships, and injury management programs are key factors in workers feeling valued and supported in their workplace, and of individual health, wellbeing and productivity. Employers play a key role in shaping these factors for positive outcomes.

What your employer can do to help you and your recovery

Your employer can:

- make sure they have a copy of their insurer's injury management program so they can review and look for opportunities to develop workplace systems to support this program
- train line managers and supervisors in injury management and communication
- develop a system to gather feedback on workplace injury management such as routine surveys of injured workers
- involve not only you as the injured worker but also your co-workers and supervisors to identify a list of alternative duties
- involve your doctor in identifying alternative duties; for example, develop a list of essential functions of particular jobs for treating doctors to complete
- seek specialist or external support for complex cases
- improve communication channels between everyone involved in the injury management process; for example, invite injured workers who are away from work to attend regular team meetings as well as social activities.

What does this mean for doctors?

Your treating doctor plays an important role in your recovery. They should support and encourage you to stay at work or return to work by:

- discussing realistic return to work expectations with you
- informing you about your injury and its effects
- making contact with your workplace during the consultation to discuss work duties or modifications to the workplace that will allow you to return to work
- discussing with you the significant health risks of not returning to work.

Doctors must also only provide workers compensation medical certificates for 'medically necessary' time off work.

Time off work: what's medically necessary?

For most workplace injuries, time off work is not medically necessary — and, as shown above, returning to work is your healthiest option.

'Medically necessary' time off work means you're totally incapacitated and need hospitalisation or strict bed rest. It may also mean that work or travelling to work is medically not advisable. This applies to both physical and psychological injuries and illnesses

Time off work under these situations ensures that the injury or illness will not significantly deteriorate, the recovery will not be delayed and harm is not caused to the injured worker or others.

Severe injuries do occur and some injuries do result in one's 'functional capacity' being affected (that is, how capable someone is of performing the tasks that are necessary or desirable in their lives). But it's uncommon that you would have absolutely no functional capacity.

To determine if you have any work capacity, the doctor should consider what you'd be doing at home. If you are able to walk around safely, sit, make breakfast or a cup of coffee, can reasonably cope psychologically, then more than likely you will be able to perform some form of useful work, assuming the duties are available.

Doctors should encourage you to develop realistic views of the relationship between health and work:

- work is an important part of rehabilitation
- the longer you are off work, the less chance you have of ever returning as most common health conditions will not be 'cured' by treatment
- work is a therapeutic intervention, it is part of treatment
- even when work is uncomfortable or difficult, it usually does not cause lasting damage
- typically, waiting for a full recovery actually delays recovery
- staying away from work may lead to depression, isolation and poorer health
- employer-supported, early return to work helps recovery, prevents deconditioning and helps provide patients with appropriate social contacts and support mechanisms.

Practical ways your doctor can help you back to employment and optimum functioning include:

- recommending a graduated increase in activity and setting a timeline for return to work
- collaboratively identifying obstacles and solutions in the workplace
- being clear about what health care can and can't achieve
- identifying possible sources of support, including family members, co-workers and relevant government services.