

Protecting older workers

By Mike Lampl

Introduction

Older individuals are the fastest-growing age group in the U.S. For the purposes of this discussion, this means individuals 50 years old or older. Due to good health, a desire to remain active or financial circumstances, many individuals in this age group will choose or will need to remain employed.

The safety tips below come from a joint study by BWC and the University of Cincinnati, as well as input from BWC safety consultants.



Discussion

Ask the group to discuss the benefits of an older work force? How old is old? Have fun. Discuss the tips in this Safety talk with employees and seek suggestions that could make the workplace safer for workers of any age. If you are meeting with managers, discuss the design tips and work on an action plan to implement them.

Reaction time

As people age, reaction time frequently decreases. Therefore, older workers may not react as quickly in a hazardous situation; this may include operating machinery, particularly if they are not familiar with the equipment.

Tips

- Encourage older workers to get regular vision exams to identify any problems and the ways to correct them.
- Older workers need sufficient lighting. It's best to have nearly uniform lighting throughout the workplace. Design gradual transition zones between areas of low and high lighting.
- Place signage in places easily seen, and avoid distractions and cluttering.

- Minimize sources of background noise.
- Avoid environments that create echoes.
- Ensure equipment warning devices are loud, operational and recognizable.

Balance

Older individuals can suffer from decreased balance due to aging, development of medical conditions or the effect of medications used to treat other conditions. The rate and extent of these changes vary from person to person. With aging, the physiological systems that play a key role in maintaining balance may become impaired (e.g., vision, muscle tone, inner ear and nervous system).

Tips

- Keep walking surfaces free of contaminants such as water, oil and ice.
- Provide handrails on inclines or stairs.
- Keep one hand on a handrail when carrying items up and down stairs and ramps.
- Wear slip-resistant and low-heeled shoes that fully support your feet.
- Maintain a regular exercise program.

Respiratory system – breathe easy

Cardiovascular respiratory function, which is associated with maximum exercise levels, declines 15 percent to 25 percent from age 20 to age 65. Oxygen consumption sharply declines after the age of 50, which makes intense physical activity more difficult for older individuals.

Tips

- Due to reduced capacity and stress from temperature extremes, be cautious or avoid strenuous work in hot/humid environments or cold environments.
- If an environment is hot, take precautions to avoid dehydration. Drink plenty of water and other fluids that do not contain caffeine.
- Be cautious with physically demanding work, particularly if the individual does not routinely perform such work.
- Encourage self-paced rather than machine-paced work.
- Ensure employees take breaks.

Musculoskeletal system

Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics shows back injuries are the most common occupational injuries and illnesses, with upper extremity and lower extremity injuries close behind. High repetition and sustained loading associated with prolonged standing and/or walking can harm an aging musculoskeletal system. People feel the effects of skeletal aging mainly in their knees, fingers, hips and spinal column.

Tips

- When increased efforts are needed, use a mechanical aid or get help from others.
- Organize the workstation to avoid lifting or reaching above shoulder level.
- Avoid repetitive tasks; incorporate job rotations if possible.
- Avoid prolonged standing. If prolonged standing is necessary, provide workers with anti-fatigue mats.
- Older workers can usually work just as fast as their younger colleagues with the proper job design. Provide a sufficient spacious workstation so employees can perform the task in alternating postures and locations. Provide tools that prevent extreme postures or having to work in a bent-over position. This places extreme demand on the joints.

Vision care

Reduced visual perception, particularly near vision, can make it difficult for older workers to perform tasks at a close range. Corrective lenses may improve near vision, but they can also increase glare. Increased glare poses a problem for detecting or reacting to potential harmful events, particularly in dimly lit areas.

Tips

- Improve contrast between objects by increasing lighting.
- Reduce glare by using shades and awnings for windows, diffusers for light sources, indirect lighting, or a larger number of low power and adjustable light sources.
- Keep workers from frequently crossing between dim areas to brightly lit areas.
- Avoid shades of blue, blue on green or blue on black in the work environment; it's difficult for older workers to differentiate these colors.
- Place signs in places that are easily seen, and avoid distractions and cluttering.

Hearing

We can expect gradual loss of hearing as we age. This loss may be imperceptible, but it does make it more challenging for older workers to discern specific sounds when they are in noisy rooms. Some older workers may have more profound hearing loss, which may place them at risk if they can't hear warning devices in the workplace.

Tips

- Minimize machine, air conditioning and other sources of background noise.
- Use sound-absorbing construction material.
- Avoid room designs that create echoes.

References

Protecting older workers (BWC): <http://www.ohiobwc.com/employer/brochureware/olderworkers>

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