

### Before you begin

Determine the demographic and age range in your facility. Determine any additional risk factors that older workers face. Are there any policies in place that address or deal with older persons?



### Introduction

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) estimates one-fourth of the American workforce is 55 or older. Workers are choosing to stay in the workforce for a variety of reasons including health-care benefits, socialization, or enjoyment of the job. However, this growing demographic brings age-associated risks. By identifying certain hazards and controlling the risks, employers can assist these experienced and valued workers to remain safe on the job.

### Definitions

- **Hazard** — a source of danger that could cause injury, illness, or damages
- **Risk** — the chance or probability a worker would be harmed by exposure to a hazard
- **Risk assessment** — a systematic process of evaluating the potential hazards and risks that may be involved in a job task

## Discussion

Here are some areas you should focus on with older workers to decrease hazards in the workplace that could lead to injuries and/or claims.

## Balance

Workers age 55 and older are at the highest risk of fatal work injuries and have a greater risk of injuries from slips, trips, and falls than any other age group. Older individuals can suffer from decreased balance due to aging, development of medical conditions, or the effect of medications used to treat other conditions. 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.

## 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.
- Ensure equipment warning devices are loud, operational, and recognizable.

## Musculoskeletal system

Data from the BLS shows back injuries are the most common occupational injuries and illnesses, with upper extremity and lower extremity injuries close behind. After age 30, there is a 3–5% loss of muscle mass per decade, with a higher decline after age 60. The musculoskeletal system weakens with time, which can mean a decreased capacity for load-bearing work as well as decreased range of motion and flexibility. Bones become more porous and more likely to fracture with trauma.

### 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 it 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 adjustable workstations and chairs so employees can perform their tasks using ideal postures. 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 clutter.

## 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.

## General health

As we strive to keep our older workforce safe, keep in mind that a well-designed, employee-centered approach benefits all workers regardless of their age.

### Tips

- Provide physical activity opportunities.
- Provide sit-stand workstations.
- Encourage healthy meal options.
- Provide smoking cessation assistance.
- Provide health screenings and on-site medical care.
- Accommodate for health-care visits.

## Group activity

- Ask the group to discuss the benefits of an older workforce.
- Perform risk assessments of the facility, looking for hazards that older workers could encounter.
- Discuss these tips with employees and seek suggestions that could make the workplace safer. If you are meeting with managers, discuss the design tips and work on an action plan.

## Resources

[National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, National Center for Productive Aging and Work](#)

[Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, \*Monthly Labor Review\*, Fatal occupational injuries to older workers](#)  
[OSHA, Safety and Health Topics: Ergonomics](#)