How to Reduce Injury Risk and Protect Manufacturing Workers

Introduction

Each year, the manufacturing industry produces approximately $2.25 trillion\(^1\) in revenue, and employs roughly 12.5 million workers, making it an essential part of the U.S. economy. However, manufacturing also faces serious setbacks. Workplace hazards and labor-intensive jobs lead to an increased risk of injuries, and the aging workforce brings a unique set of health care challenges.

Some of those workplace hazards are common across all industries, and there are some universal solutions to help employers combat them.

Common Injuries Impacting Manufacturers

The three most common injuries in manufacturing – contact with an object; overexertion; and slips, trips, and falls – make up more than 80% of all work-related injuries in the industry.\(^2\) By understanding how these injuries occur, employers can take preventive steps to protect their workforce.

Contact with Object

Contact with object injuries include struck against an object, struck by an object, caught in an object or equipment, and caught in collapsing material. These injuries typically result from heavy or moving equipment, inattention to surroundings, faulty equipment, lack of proper training, and poor housekeeping.

With a few proactive steps, like providing proper safety training and conducting safety assessments, manufacturing companies can reduce the risk of employees getting hurt by objects. Accident prevention steps can include:

- Securing loose materials or items stored on high shelves
- Wearing the proper personal protective equipment (PPE), like steel-toed shoes and hard hats
- Avoiding walking behind moving equipment
- Using extra caution around corners and near doorways

Overexertion

Overexertion injuries typically result from poor ergonomics and repetitive movements. When workers excessively lift, push, pull, reach, bend, etc., they can damage their soft tissue (muscles, nerves, tendons, joints) and experience debilitating pain. Overexertion injuries can also occur if a worker sits or stands for extended periods, uses excessive force, or works in extreme temperatures.

The best way to avoid overexertion injuries is by stretching, exercising, and following ergonomic standards. Regular exercise and stretching prepares the body for more rigorous activities, keeping the

\(^1\) Bureau of Economic Analysis

muscles warm and the core strong. Ergonomics help to fit the workspace to the worker, ensuring they can safely reach, bend, lift, etc. Employees should also be trained on proper lifting techniques and take frequent breaks from a sustained position or movement.

**Slips, Trips, and Falls**

Injuries from slips, trips, and falls can occur in any industry, and manufacturing is no exception. All it takes is a misplaced object or an unattended spill to cause an accident. Some of the most common locations for these injuries are doorways, ramps, cluttered hallways, ladders, and stairs.

But preventing slips, trips, and falls can be as simple as following good housekeeping tips. Make sure your employees know to always:

- Clean up spills immediately or at least mark them with a warning
- Wear slip-resistant shoes
- Keep drawers and cabinet doors closed at all times
- Avoid standing on a wheeled surface

As the employer, you should also ensure that handrails are installed on both sides of all staircases. Be sure there’s adequate lighting both indoors and outdoors, and any uneven surfaces are fixed or clearly marked.

**Health Challenges of an Aging Workforce**

According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), more than 20% of the American workforce is age 55 or older—a number that will continue to grow as we approach 2020. In the manufacturing industry, this number increases to nearly 25% - or 1 in every 4 employees.³

The benefit of an aging workforce is the experience. Productivity is higher because these older employees know what they’re doing, which also means they’re less likely to be involved in a workplace accident. However, getting older presents new challenges to anyone, and some of those challenges impact the workplace.

Here’s how you can address three common health challenges faced by an aging workforce.

**Chronic Conditions**

Older employees are more prone to developing chronic conditions, the most common being arthritis and hypertension for workers over the age of 55.⁴

These conditions impact the general health of the employee, increasing both absenteeism (missing work for health problems) and presenteeism (coming to work when sick). Chronic conditions can also mean that the employee requires more doctor’s appointments and medications, increasing the overall cost of employee health care.

While chronic conditions can be treated and managed, they can also be prevented through improved employee health. With an onsite clinic, employees have access to high-quality health care at the workplace. This immediate access helps to manage and reduce the risk of chronic conditions, and improves productivity while allowing employees to get the care they need. Onsite medical centers can also include wellness programs with health coaches and preventive health care, keeping employees healthy and preventing the development of chronic conditions.

³ [https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat18b.htm](https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat18b.htm)
⁴ [https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/productiveaging/safetyandhealth.html](https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/productiveaging/safetyandhealth.html)
Longer Recovery Times

Although older employees are less likely to get injured at work, when they do, it can take them nearly two weeks longer to recover than their younger counterparts. Part of this is attributed to chronic conditions, but it’s also because an older employee’s body is not as resilient as a younger employee. These longer recovery times can increase the cost of workers’ compensation claims and potentially cause long-term health issues for the injured worker.

The best way to address this issue is by implementing a well-planned injury care program. Rather than just reacting to an injury, developing a proactive program allows you to set the recovery process in motion immediately after an injury. The faster you seek treatment for the injury, the faster the injury will heal, and the faster the employee can return to work.

Decreased Strength

As people age, their muscle mass, number, and size of muscle fibers decreases. This means muscles take longer to respond, get tired faster, and cause an overall loss of strength in older workers. In a labor-intensive role, these workers are at greater risk of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), like joint dislocation, tendonitis, and lower back pain. And an MSD greatly increases the risk of a serious injury.

To keep older employees safe, you may need to consider certain work restrictions or modifications. This can include reducing the time spent performing repetitive activities, providing mechanical assists for physical activities like lifting heavy objects, and choosing hand tools that are appropriately sized and easier to grip.

Occupational Health Services that Protect Your Workforce

An effective occupational health program can address any health and safety concerns faced by your workforce, whether it’s preventing and treating common injuries or improving the health of older employees. Some of the best-suited services for the manufacturing industry include injury care, physical therapy, and onsite health centers.

Injury Care

A proactive injury care program ensures that employees will get the treatment they need, immediately after an injury occurs at work. Concentra has spent nearly 40 years treating work-related injuries and quickly returning employees to work. Our injury care service relies on an early-intervention philosophy and active treatment plan. Because we start treatment as soon as possible and rely on physical therapy over bed rest and medication, injured employees experience a faster, fuller recovery.

Physical Therapy

Along with treating injuries, Concentra’s physical therapists (PTs) can also help prevent work-related injuries from occurring in the first place. Our PTs can educate your employees on proper stretching, exercise, and lifting techniques, and complete an ergonomic assessment of your workplace. Concentra’s PT program also includes pre-placement exams like a human performance evaluation (HPE). The HPE tests a potential hire’s physical capabilities against the physical requirements of the job, preventing injury risk by hiring the right fit for the job.

Onsite Health

A manufacturing company is the perfect fit for an onsite health center. Onsite centers bring health
care directly to the workplace, with services and staff customized to the needs of the workforce. An onsite can include injury care, physical therapy, wellness services, urgent care, and more. Having these services available at work ensures that employees get the care they need as soon as they need it, without the inconvenience of missing work for hours at a time. An onsite can address both preventive health and treatment, keeping your employees safe and healthy in all circumstances.

Conclusion

The manufacturing industry faces many risks, from serious injuries that take employees away from work, to health conditions that decrease productivity at work. With an effective occupational health program, including injury care and physical therapy, manufacturers can rely on a suite of services that will protect the health and safety of their workforce.

About Concentra

Concentra is a national health care company focused on improving the health of America’s workforce, one patient at a time. Through its affiliated clinicians, the company provides occupational medicine, urgent care, physical therapy, and wellness services from more than 530 medical centers in 44 states. In addition to these medical center locations, Concentra serves employers by providing a broad range of health services and operating more than 140 onsite medical facilities. To learn more about Concentra, visit www.concentra.com.

Contact an Expert

Working with an experienced occupational health provider can help manufacturing companies prevent injuries, reduce the impact of injuries, and address the issues of an aging workforce.

Talk to a Concentra work health expert if you would like to start an occupational health program to improve employee health at work.