



Improving Return to Work Outcomes after Injury





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Returning an injured worker to gainful employment after a soft tissue injury is a goal shared by the worker, their employer, medical personnel and insurer. Early return to work promotes positive outcomes with respect to claim cost, long-term disability and increases workplace productivity. Unfortunately it is not always simple; however if certain principles are understood, this is attainable for the majority of injured workers.

The aim wherever possible should be to return the worker to their pre-injury duties and hours wherever possible. This is best achieved by observing the following principles.:

1. **Communication and Collaboration.** All stakeholders need to communicate with each other and reach consensus about the management plan, time frame and return to work goals. Workers need to be involved in this process and understand clearly what the expectations are.

2. **Education.** Education of the stakeholders is crucial. This is the job of the health practitioner, who has the role of explaining the diagnosis and management pathway to the employer, worker and insurer.

3. **Early Realistic Return to Work.** An early return to work needs to be facilitated whenever possible. The evidence clearly shows that when workers return to some form of duties early, their chances of returning to full duties is greatly increased. Where possible, employers should have a duties list that can be sent to the treating Physiotherapist who can then identify suitable duties and discuss these with the employer

4. **Rehabilitation Approach.** Rehabilitation needs to be based on the latest available evidence. The worker's dependence on the treating practitioner needs to be gradually reduced via self-management strategies provided to the worker. Exercise is commonly used in rehabilitation but this has to be professionally prescribed. Keys to effective programming include:

- Collaboration between the prescriber e.g. the Physiotherapist, worker and employer regarding goals, outcome measures and return to work plans
- Exercises must be individually prescribed and specifically address the injured worker's job requirements
- Self-management strategies should be combined with supervised activities
- Supervision should taper off and unsupervised sessions should increase in number as the worker improves
- Progression of exercises should occur at regular intervals and should work towards mimicking the desired return to work task

5. **Analysis.** The cause of the injury needs to be examined. Frequently it is due to poor risk assessment or manual handling technique and the worker should be instructed in both prior to returning to pre-injury duties. Management must work closely with health providers to determine preventative measures.