

Hackensack Meridian Works

The Benefits of an Ergonomics Program for Employers and Employees

Ergonomics programs in the workplace help decrease the incidence of work-related injuries. Companies that implement ergonomics programs can significantly reduce the number of work-related musculoskeletal disorders among their employees.



“It’s important and very beneficial for the employer and employees to have an ergonomics program, especially if there are a lot of workers’ comp claims,” says Rhea O’Connor, a physical therapist and manager of Team Health at Hackensack Meridian Health. “It’s helpful for companies whose workers perform very heavy work, like construction, or very repetitive work, as in a factory.”

Improper lifting or pulling techniques, unnatural positions, or repetitive motions often cause work-related musculoskeletal disorders. They’re a leading cause of workplace injuries, which result in direct and indirect costs for employers.

Direct costs include doctor visits, prescription medications, and physical therapy appointments covered by workers' compensation insurance. Indirect costs include absenteeism and decreased employee productivity.

"Research has shown that the indirect costs of injuries are four to five times higher than direct costs," O'Connor says. "That includes lost days, overtime for those who take over the job, restricted-duty programs – when injured employees return before or while recovering, so somebody must step in and do their usual workload – and replacing employees who cannot get back to their usual work, including costs for new-employee training and orientation. It gets costly."



Certified ergonomists and physical or occupational therapists typically develop workplace ergonomics programs. They review workers' compensation claims to look for injury patterns and then perform site assessments. They check for conditions that could cause injury, like equipment that promotes awkward positioning or reaching. They assess workstations and workers' techniques to see whether everyone uses proper form when lifting, reaching, or sitting. They recommend minimizing injuries and providing training to help employees learn new techniques, adjust to new equipment, and use proper body mechanics while working.

An ergonomics program can contribute to employee productivity and job satisfaction. If workers know that their employer makes ergonomic changes to the workplace, they'll be more likely to report minor injuries before they become problematic. This may help to stem absenteeism and workers' compensation claims.

"Studies have shown that numerous employees don't like to rock the boat, so to speak, to report minor injuries," O'Connor says. "If the environment is safe and healthy, they can be more productive and are more likely to stay with a company for long periods."

Ergonomics programs benefit employers and employees because they:

Address repetitive motions

When an ergonomics program identifies workers experiencing injury because they repeat the same tasks hundreds of times per shift, it suggests modifications that improve workers' health and maintain the company's productivity levels.

"It's good to rotate jobs, so one person isn't doing the same job over and over, putting strain on the same body parts repeatedly," O'Connor says. "We're not machines. We can't get an oil change every so often. It isn't good for our body."

Recommend adjustable equipment

Workers of different sizes shouldn't have to use the same equipment or furniture. Ergonomists recommend adjustable equipment and furniture that anyone can use, mainly if there are shared workstations.

"You can decrease the risk of injury if you train workers to adjust it to their height, reach, or wingspan before each use," O'Connor says. "It can fit every shift worker, accommodating left-handed versus right-handed people."

Promote movement in the workplace.

Whether employees sit at desks or carry items through warehouses, they periodically need a break to reduce their risk of injury.

"I'm always asked about the best chair, but there is no best chair if you are going to sit on it for hours at a time," O'Connor says. "You have to take breaks and move. Recognize, 'This is draining me,' and walk to the water fountain or the restroom. Schedule walking meetings if you can. Change positions often."

Benefits of an Ergonomics Program for Employees

- **Reduced Pain and Discomfort:** Ergonomics addresses the root causes of musculoskeletal discomfort, reducing pain in the back, neck, shoulders, wrists, and other areas.

- Improved Physical Well-being: Ergonomics promotes proper posture, movement, and workstation setup, contributing to better overall physical health and reducing the risk of long-term injuries.
- Increased Comfort and Job Satisfaction: Working in a comfortable and supportive environment leads to greater job satisfaction and a more positive work experience.
- Improved Focus and Concentration: Employees who are free from pain and discomfort can focus better on their tasks, leading to improved performance.
- Greater Sense of Control and Empowerment: Ergonomics programs often involve employee participation in identifying and addressing workplace hazards, giving them greater control over their work environment.
- Reduced Stress and Fatigue: Ergonomic improvements can reduce physical strain and mental fatigue, leading to a more relaxed and productive work experience.
- Improved Overall Quality of Life: Ergonomics contributes to a better overall quality of life both inside and outside of work by reducing pain and improving physical well-being.

By implementing a comprehensive ergonomics program, organizations can create a win-win situation for employers and employees, fostering a healthier, more productive, and more positive work environment.