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Flexibility Key for Older Workers

An important part of working safely and successfully as an older worker is to try to remain flexible—both mentally and physically.

The percentage of older workers is rising as the general population ages and as workers postpone retirement or return to work. The average worker age is expected to be above 40 by the year 2008, up from 35 in 1980.

Various studies of older workers indicate they have fewer injury incidents than younger workers, but when they do get hurt their injuries are worst.

While younger workers are more likely to receive hand or eye injuries, older workers are more likely to have back problems. Possibly the result of accumulated injuries.

So why are we discussing this? If you are an older worker, you need to be aware of some particular hazards to your safety as well as strategies to avoid them. If you are a younger worker now, you have a good chance of being an older worker in the future. Much of the advice to keep older workers safe is useful to workers of all ages.

Physical changes occurring as part of the natural aging process can contribute to work place injuries:

- Vision undergoes a change particularly the ability to adjust focus and to see things at a certain distance. Many people start requiring prescription eyewear for close work, or combination lenses such as bifocals, sometime in their 40s. Peripheral vision, the ability to see things at the side, depth perception and resistance to glare also diminish as time goes on. An older person needs more light to see the same thing a young person is looking at. For motor vehicle drivers this means more difficulty seeing things at night.

- Hearing changes with age, at least partly because of damage from a lifetime of noise exposure. An older person might not be able to hear higher-pitched noises and be unable to pick out a voice from a noisy background.
- Muscular strength and the range of movement for joints declines. It becomes more difficult to maintain posture and balance as time goes on.
- Getting enough sleep gets to be a challenge, contributing to fatigue and making shift work harder to handle.
- Regulation of body temperature gets a little difficult, making the older worker more susceptible to heat or cold. Doing hard work in warm, humid conditions can bring on heat stress.
- Medications and chronic illnesses can affect the ability to move and respond quickly.
- Ability to think and learn new things changes. Some mental abilities diminish, but others remain constant or improve. Experience and expertise can compensate for declining ability to process information quickly.

The first step toward avoiding injuries as an older worker is to be aware of possible changes in abilities. The second is to work around them. For instance, a change from shift work to days might be in order.

Avoiding unnecessary driving at night and being vigilant about keeping windshields clean inside and out are ways to address vision problems. So is having regular eye checkups and eyewear prescription changes as needed. A talk with the doctor or pharmacist about side effects of medications can help prevent injuries resulting from impairment.

Safety Tip: At any age, it is important to be aware of limitations and deal with them so you can do your job safely and well. As the work population ages, this type of personal flexibility will become an increasingly important job skill. Have a safe and healthy thanksgiving.

