

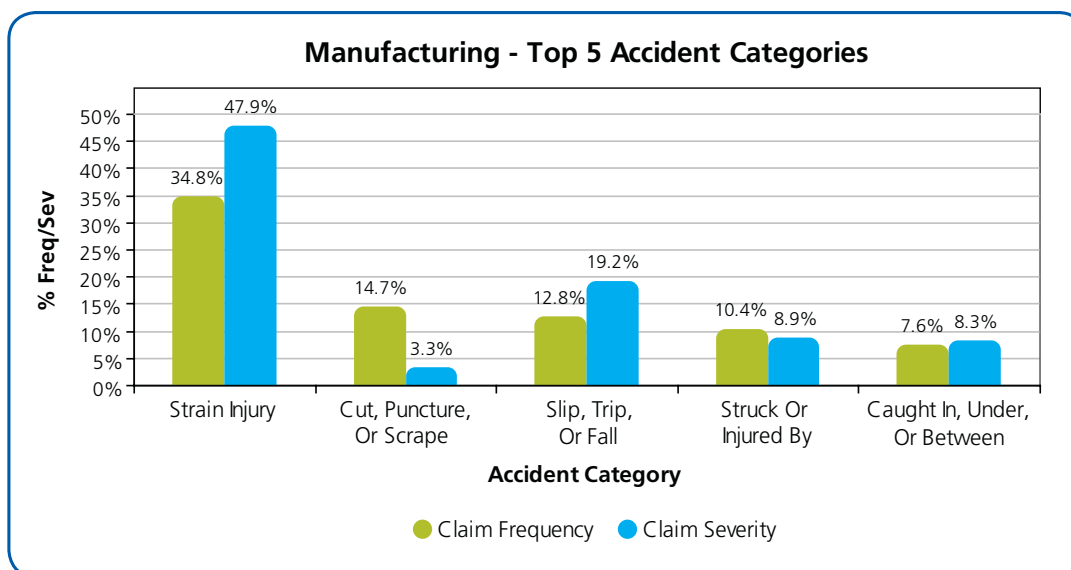
Are workplace strains straining your workers' compensation costs?

A comprehensive, customized stretching program can help reduce the pain for all.

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While technology has eliminated manual tasks in many industries, manufacturing is one industry that still requires a high degree of manual labor. Some of it is small, more repetitive hand and arm movements on an assembly line, while other tasks such as moving large shipments of parts requires heavy lifting and larger movements of shoulders and backs. Like all industries, manufacturing is experiencing the effects of an aging workforce that results in lost agility and flexibility that can increase the frequency and severity of strains and sprains.

It comes as no surprise then to learn that strains and sprains are the leading injury categories in manufacturing, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.¹ Nearly 34% of days away from work are the result of sprains and strains according to the Bureau's data. Similarly, workers' compensation data from Zurich shows that the top accident category in manufacturing by claims frequency and severity is strain injuries. The frequency and severity of strains and sprains can affect a company's bottom line as it decreases productivity and profitability.



Workplace stretching: the evolution of a proven solution

Since the 1980s, health professionals including physical therapists and ergonomic specialists have hypothesized that workers with a higher degree of flexibility are more likely to perform their jobs without injury. Many manufacturers started to incorporate workplace stretching programs in order to reduce the severity and frequency of strains and sprains. While their intentions were good, implementation often fell short for several reasons. The programs weren't supported at the higher levels of the organization and employees were not educated or trained properly and therefore felt uncomfortable with the program itself. In addition, the programs weren't customized to the specific job movements/tasks, and measurements weren't in place to gauge the impact and sustainability of the program. Consequently, workplace stretching programs fell out of favor for many organizations by the end of the 1990s.

Recently, as workers' compensation costs have dramatically increased for manufacturers, there has been a resurgence of workplace stretching programs. The difference this time around is that they are focused, customized and measurable.

Building a successful stretching program: it's all in the details

Good manufacturers know that success lies in the details, having the right materials, the best precision tools and the most effective processes. The same theory applies to a workplace stretching program - it's only as good as the attention paid to the specific details and movements involved in the workers' job.

Too often, in the haste to implement a workplace stretching program, a manufacturer may engage with a local rehab center or independent physical therapist to offer services on a weekly basis at a plant location. What this type of approach may overlook is a comprehensive, holistic analysis that integrates specific past injuries with a customized program to focus on movements unique to workers' jobs.

A comprehensive, customized workplace stretching program typically includes:

A needs assessment by location

- Identification of where injuries occur in the plant or location
- Analysis of what activities typically result in strains and sprains (i.e., pushing and pulling, lifting, etc.)
- Identification of what body parts are most frequently injured by strains and sprains

Analysis of physical job demands

- Onsite observation of range of motion/repetition, work environment (bending, twisting, reaching, postures, etc.) among all job classes
- Documentation of activities, paces, frequencies
- Interviews with foreman, supervisors, safety personnel

Development of a customized program

- Muscle motions/requirements divided by job class
- Build out of specific stretching routines based on jobs (assembly line, inventory manager, shipment loader, etc.)
- Creation of branded training materials

Establishment of metrics

- Determination of measurement variables of the program
- Process to report success/areas of improvement

Training and education

- Empower employees - provide them with the knowledge to understand why the stretching program is being implemented and help them understand the benefits of stretching (i.e., increased flexibility, better range of motion, improved blood circulation, better posture, overall stress relief and injury prevention)
- Conduct train-the-trainer sessions to ensure the program rolls out properly

Follow-up

- Seek feedback from employees on a regular basis to maintain momentum of the program - What is working and what isn't working? What can be done to make the program even better?
- Share results and celebrate improvements

Conclusion

Based on Zurich's experience with more than 100 companies implementing workplace stretching programs, the results are dramatic: an overall 61% reduction in strain/sprain frequency and 30% reduction in strain/sprain severity. This reduction in frequency and severity can translate to a savings of hundreds of thousands of dollars of direct costs. Although harder to measure, it is also important to keep in mind indirect cost savings such as avoiding absenteeism, increased productivity, improved employee morale, etc. These savings can often add up to 100 - 150% of direct costs.

As manufacturers continually look for ways to gain efficiencies in order to maximize productivity in their operations, they must also continue to focus on employee safety and risk reduction. Not only are you helping your bottom line by helping reduce strains and sprains, you are also helping the overall well-being and longevity of your workforce.

While the implementation of a customized stretching program can be a big investment, if done correctly, the payoff can be immense.

¹*BLS 2008 data (11/2009). Table 9. Lost Work Day Cases by Duration, Production Occupations

² National Safety Council; Accident Facts, 2010

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