



Disability Management

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Provider Information Series

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A critical role of the treating Physician is disability management. Prompt return to work in a capacity suitable for the Injured Worker's abilities and need for restrictions reinforces self-esteem and improves the therapeutic outcome. Injured Workers if necessary can be placed in different jobs from their usual duty or their usual job can be temporarily modified to accommodate their limitations ("modified duty" or "light duty"). In time with progressive clinical improvement, these restrictions should be modified to accommodate a greater work capacity. Ultimately, this results in a greater chance of the Injured Worker achieving total recovery.

The Physician patient relationship is critical in a return to work effort. The patients frequently require reassurance that they will not further injure themselves, they require assurance that they are not relinquishing rights or benefits. They must be reassured that you as their treating Physician is a partner in this process and continue to "represent" yourself as their advocate. This is most effectively accomplished by the Physician with direct dialogue and most importantly reassurance and sufficient explanation of the return to work process to the Injured Worker. It is critical that the treating Physician conveys to the Injured Worker that participation in return to some type of work is in the patient's best interest and indeed is felt to be "therapeutic" and an integral part of the recovery process. The Injured Worker should be assured by the Physician that return to some type of work does not imply closure of the claim or completion of medical care; the Injured Worker must be assured that he/she is not altering the status of the claim by returning to some type of work. This is a frequent misconception of the Injured Worker and should be proactively addressed by the treating Physician.

Injured Workers may doubt that any modification of their job duties is available to them. The treating Physician must assure the Injured Worker that the limitations set forth will be in writing, and should the Injured Worker feel that the actual work required once he/she has returned to work exceed what the restrictions are, the Injured Worker should contact the Claims Examiner. Best practice to assure the Injured Worker of this process is to be certain that the Injured Worker has the name and telephone number of the Claims Examiner if indeed contact needs to be made. It is incumbent on the Employer to make these accommodations and if the Employer is unable to accommodate the written restrictions, this will be communicated by the Employer to the Claims Examiner. The Claims Examiner will then initiate temporary disability payments. This is additional assurance to the Injured Worker that their income will remain intact and will help to alleviate substantial anxiety following an injury.

The written form should contain the Injured Workers' name, date of injury and claim number.

Additionally, the specific restrictions should be clearly stated. The limitation on lifting for example should specify the number of pounds that can be lifted and the frequency of lifting. If the injury involves a lower extremity, the restriction may be in the limitation to time and distance walked or standing, climbing and kneeling. There is a sample document listing the commonly injured body parts and the corresponding work activities that may need to be addressed. The return to work form should also list the specific date the Injured Worker is to return to work and the specific date the Injured Worker is to return to the office. In addition, any other appropriate comments should be included on the form such as the frequency of physical medicine treatments the patient must attend. This again reassures the Injured Worker that medical treatment will continue as deemed necessary by you as the treating Physician. There is a sample of a return to work form as well.

As the Injured Worker's condition improves, the degree of restriction should decrease. This is termed "functional restoration": the need for treatment decreases as the physical ability of the patient increases. Ultimately this will allow the Injured Worker to return to his/her normal occupation and duties.