

Workplace Safety Should Never Get Old

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The 76 million “baby boomers” are growing older and our workforce is graying with them. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the proportion of “older” workers (over age 55) will increase steadily from 12% in 2000 to 20% by 2025. The physical changes associated with aging could affect workers and their safety on the job. Employers and employees should prepare for the aging workforce now to ensure that job tasks and worksites remain safe.

Physical changes vary by individual, but as we age, we tend to lose muscle mass and flexibility; a 15-20% decrease in strength by age 60 is typical. Employers should prepare for this by examining work tasks and determining the physical requirements for each job. Job tasks should not require that employees work at their maximum capacity repeatedly or over extended periods of time; this can lead to injury to a worker of any age. Altering job tasks and processes and providing assistive devices such as hand trucks, dollies, and hoists can reduce worker effort on the job.

A worker’s balance, vision and hearing may also change with age. For example, a worker age 60 generally requires eight times the amount of light to see as clearly as a 20-year-old. Employers can prepare now by examining the current workplace lighting and upgrading it as necessary. Additional lighting will allow all workers to see their job tasks and each other more clearly. Non-skid flooring, the addition of handrails, and an emphasis on good housekeeping can prevent slips and falls. Communication methods may also need evaluation because verbal commands may be more difficult for an older worker to hear, resulting in hazardous mistakes.

Employees can minimize the effects of aging by maintaining a healthy diet, exercise, and strength-training programs to build muscle and bone mass. Because sleep regulation is more difficult with age, employees should adjust their sleep habits to remain well-rested. Sleep deprivation can cause reduced attention and reaction times, a safety hazard. Older workers need to know that the ability to adapt to temperature changes (thermoregulation) decreases with age. They should be prepared with layers of clothing and close monitoring because heat and cold will affect them faster than when they were younger.

Both employers and employees will need to work together to make sure that the older worker can do the job safely within their physical abilities. Employers should always try to fit the job task and tools to the individual for maximum safety and this is especially important for older workers. Likewise, older employees need to know their limits. If there are job tasks that they cannot safely do anymore, they need to communicate with their supervisor and consider job accommodations to protect themselves and their coworkers.

Does the workplace need a complete overhaul to suit older workers? No; but it is always best to adjust the job tasks and tools to the individual, regardless of age. Good risk management such as job hazard analyses, ergonomics, and wellness programs can maximize safety for older workers as well as their younger counterparts. □