

Accommodating an aging workforce



If your workplace is typical, the average age of your employees is getting higher every year, not lower. In fact, in some workforces, such as those in health care and maintenance, the average age is nearing 50. But a lot of what you think you know about aging and the workplace may not be accurate. Here are some facts you should know:

To avoid slips, trips, and falls:

- There is no specific age that can be used to classify a worker as “older.”
- All of the changes associated with getting older are normal and the vast majority of them, like decreases in hearing, happen to everyone.
- Older workers don’t get injured more often; in fact, they get injured less often than their younger colleagues. What we do see is that they take longer to heal and may need to have job restrictions or days away for longer periods than their younger counterparts.
- Workers who already have other types of health problems, like high blood pressure or heart disease, seem to have more difficulties as they get older in general and may also have a harder time recovering from an injury.

Vision

Changes in vision are the most common deficit we see in older workers. Just about everyone experiences them, regardless of whether or not they need prescription lenses when they are younger. Some of the most common changes include the following:

- Because the lens of the eye hardens, it is harder to adapt to changes in light levels, especially going from an area of low light to strong light (i.e., someone operating a forklift in a warehouse and driving out onto a loading dock in the bright sunlight). People may find they are less able to tolerate glare, and have difficulty driving at night driving.
- Reading things up close can become more difficult. This condition is called presbyopia; many people use reading glasses they can purchase in a drug store to help with this problem.
- Older people are more likely to suffer from visual conditions like cataracts and macular degeneration.

You can modify the work environment to address these issues by:

- Making sure the work area is well-lit and that there are no areas where shadow, particularly on the ground, can make it easier to trip.
- Making sure staircases are well-lit, especially at the top and bottom. Also, make sure the treads are easy to see by painting them with fluorescent paint.
- Eliminate or reduce glare, particularly in work areas near windows.
- Provide safety glasses with built-in readers so workers don't have to wear readers under their safety glasses.

Hearing

Did you know that everyone begins to lose their hearing around age 30 to 35? It's called presbycusis, and it continues as we age. Some people won't notice the changes until closer to age 50, but those who work in a noisy environment may notice much sooner. Look around your workplace and think about this:

- Offer hearing protection when for workers around noisy areas, like around machinery or in compressor rooms, even when it isn't required by law.
- Encourage workers to get an annual audiogram to make sure they catch any changes in their hearing before it becomes more serious.

Overall physical condition

We all know that the body changes as we age. By paying attention to these changes, you can encourage your employees to take steps to avoid injuries and strain.

- Balance shifts, making it harder to recover from a trip. Someone who might have been able to adjust and recover from a fall very quickly may have more trouble.
- It becomes harder to recover from the physical stress of work; working long shifts day after day makes it even more difficult.
- The skin ages, making it more susceptible to exposure from harmful chemicals.
- Overall strength peaks at around age 30 and declines from there; this is true regardless of personal fitness. However, with exercise and weight training, it's possible to improve strength and flexibility.

You can help address these issues by:

- Encouraging workers to think twice before signing on for overtime; the extra pay is nice, but the additional hours may make it harder to rest and recharge between shifts.

- Working with an occupational or physical therapist to teach your employees exercises to improve or maintain the body's core strength (torso, stomach, back).
- Encouraging employees to make fitness a priority; consider offering fitness classes on-site or a discount at a local gym.

Cognitive changes

Intelligence doesn't decrease with age, but the way we use the brain does change. Many people will experience some short-term memory changes by their mid-50s. Multitasking, which is never easy, can become more difficult.

One way to address cognitive changes is to offer ongoing training that focuses on hands-on learning and group discussion.

You don't need a Fountain of Youth

You don't need a Fountain of Youth to keep your workplace and your workforce healthy and productive. With an understanding of the changes that come with ages, and the strengths your older employees offer, you can make sure your workplace is safe and productive.

**See what AmeriHealth
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for you:**

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