



Government of **Western Australia**
Department of **Commerce**

Understanding the safety and health needs of your workplace

Older workers and safety



A guide for employers, workers,
safety and health representatives
and committees.

commission
for occupational
safety and health



Older workers bring many benefits to the workplace. Their skills and experience gained from many years of employment can:

- help reduce the impact of labour and skills shortages;
- be valuable in mentoring and training roles; and
- assist with safety and health management because of their substantial knowledge and experience.

This bulletin has been produced to raise awareness on occupational safety and health issues relevant to older workers. Employers have a general duty of care to address potential age-related factors and provide and maintain, as far as practical, a working environment where workers are not exposed to hazards and reduce the risks of injury or harm.

While certain risks are associated with ageing, these should be considered in the context of safety and health management for all workers. Reducing the workplace hazards and improving work and job design, particularly those associated with a physically demanding work environment, will bring benefits to all at the workplace.

Definitions of 'older workers' vary, with studies defining them as those workers over 45 or 55 years of age. However, the ageing process varies greatly according to the individual person and their past work experience and general level of health. These types of factors combined with both the work environment in which an individual is engaged and the task demands involved in the position play a critical role in determining whether an older worker has an increased risk of injury or harm.

Occupational safety and health should not be used as a reason for excluding older workers from the workplace. Older workers are often unfairly stereotyped and ill health and increased injuries are not inevitable with age. As everybody ages differently, we cannot generalise about older workers and assume they will have certain characteristics in relation to potential safety and health risks at work. Treating a person unfairly because of their age is also unlawful under the Western Australian *Equal Opportunity Act 1984* and the Commonwealth's *Age Discrimination Act 2004*.

Age-related changes to people in the workforce

With the ageing population and the trend of people staying longer in the workforce, the number of older workers in Western Australia has risen and will continue to rise. The Australian labour force is expected to age dramatically, with 80 per cent of the labour force growth occurring in the 45 years and over age group for the period 1999-2016¹.

Individual variation, level of fitness, state of health and previous type of work, as well as the effect of non-age related factors, all make a difference to how a person ages. This means that a decline in health is not inevitable and some characteristics, commonly identified as age-related, can occur in those who are younger.

Age-related factors that can affect an individual's ability to work safely in some cases may include age-related wear and tear and degenerative changes to the body and ill health. There are different types of long-term physical conditions associated with older age groups, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and arthritis or osteoporosis, which may impact on a person's ability to work safely.

Changes in performance capacity may arise from:

- age-related reductions in muscular strength, which can reduce an individual's capacity to perform physically heavy work. However, the level of decline varies greatly with physical condition and may be less for older workers who stay fit;
- reduced elasticity in body tissues, leading to decreased range of movement, which could have implications for tasks that involve work at extremes of posture;

- a decline in information processing capacity including changes in hearing, vision and thought processing. However, this is not inevitable and can be balanced out by improved decision making ability, expertise and experience; and
- older workers may have difficulties in working in very cold or very hot environments due to a change in their body's ability to control body temperature.

Know your workforce and its needs

The Western Australian workers' compensation statistics show that:

- sprains and strains are the most common injury for older workers, which means that incidents of muscular stress are a common cause;
- fractures, contusions and crushing injuries and disorders of the spinal vertebrae and muscle/tendons/soft tissue are relatively high; and
- falls, slips and trips are also relatively high.

Employers should review their accidents, incidents and hazard reports to identify any potential age-related trends. These practices will support employers to meet their duty of care responsibilities to adapt work practices according to the different needs of older workers.

The key to maintaining a safe workplace is matching job-task demands with an individual's abilities and skill set. This can be achieved through various processes, including:

- identifying workplace hazards and conducting risk assessments appropriate to the age demographic of the workplace;
- pre-placement discussions;
- ongoing consultation and communication;
- liaison with safety and health representatives;
- monitoring and reviewing workplace practices;
- conducting a survey to gain awareness of age-related factors in the workplace and using this information to develop a range of strategies; and
- seeking medical advice for more complex issues.

Consulting older workers and safety and health representatives and committees and engaging them in safety and health issues is an important part of the risk management process. Workers know about risks relevant to their job and may be able to suggest different solutions. Their involvement helps to promote a safer work culture.

Risk management

When doing a risk assessment, you need to be aware that the hazards are the same for all workers but the risks are likely to be different for older workers. Controlling the risks for older workers should be part of the overall risk management for all workers and will be of benefit to all at the workplace.

This involves carrying out the risk management process, which is a four step process of:

1. **identifying hazards** – this involves recognising factors or processes that may cause injury or harm to the health of an older worker;
2. **assessing the risks** – this involves assessing the risk of injury or harm to a person resulting from each hazard identified in the above step;
3. **controlling risks** – implementing control measures to eliminate or reduce the risks of injury or harm; and
4. **monitoring and reviewing** the control of measures to ensure they are continuing to prevent or control exposure hazards and risks and checking that the controls implemented are working and are not introducing new hazards or risks.

There is a hierarchy (preferred order) of controls to implement for reducing injuries or harm, ranging from the most effective to the least effective. In particular:

- i) elimination – implementing a control to remove the hazard or hazardous work practice;
- ii) substitution – substituting or replacing a hazard or hazardous work practice;
- iii) isolation – isolating or separating the hazard from people;
- iv) engineering controls – if the hazard cannot be eliminated, substituted or isolated, an engineering control (eg a guard or barrier) is the next preferred measure;
- v) administrative controls – these include providing safe work procedures and instructions and training; and
- vi) personal protective equipment – this option should be considered only when other control measures are not practical, or to increase protection.

Reducing the risk to the best achievable level may require a combination of these control measures.

Changes to the duties of older workers or adaptations to the workplace to accommodate them should not create a risk for other people at the workplace. An example of where this could happen is if the solution is to reduce heavy manual tasks for an older worker by overloading a younger worker with them.

Further information on risk management can be found in the WorkSafe publication, *First step: Managing safety and health hazards in your workplace*. This is available from WorkSafe's publication officer on 9327 8775, or www.worksafe.wa.gov.au

Hazard factors and risks

Common hazard factors to be considered include:

- job-person fit, eg becoming a poor fit for the work undertaken;
- work organisation, eg:
 - task variation;
 - repetition of task demands;
 - rest breaks;
 - training and supervision; and
 - planning and communication;
- task demands, eg manual handling;

- work environment, eg:
 - noise;
 - temperature;
 - lighting;
 - vibration;
 - work station design; and
 - slippery or uneven surfaces.

Age-related hazard factors that increase risk include:

- potential increased exposure to sprains and strains, muscular stress incidents, musculoskeletal disorders, low back pain, vibration, heat, slips, trips, falls and noise;
- in some cases, more severe injuries and disability;
- development of occupational disease;
- depending on the job and the individual, high stress situations;
- depending on the job and the individual, physical issues such as a decrease or changes in physical/performance capacity (anatomical and physiological factors) eg in relation to:
 - physical functional capacity eg muscle strength with static muscular work, lifting and carrying, sudden peak loads, awkward work and repetitive work, aerobic capacity and flexibility;
 - postural changes;
 - mobility (including decreased joint mobility, reduced tissue elasticity and balance);
 - visual deficits/acuity and colour discrimination;
 - hearing;
 - cognitive changes (eg slowed perception and decision making, attention deficits and memory deficits);
 - tolerance for heat/cold; and
 - development of sleeping disorders and/or fatigue; and
- ill health and disease-related issues eg cardio vascular disease and diabetes.

Control measures

Potential control measures to be considered include:

Matching the task to the person so that the demands of the work tasks match are aligned to the capabilities and skills of the person, wherever possible.

Work organisation – organise work tasks with consideration to all the matters listed under hazard factors. Work organisation matters to consider include:

- **enabling sufficient individual control over work** so there is scope to plan work and make decisions about completion and how problems should be tackled. This allows people to:
 - better cope with work demands; and
 - adopt performance strategies to minimise problems that may be associated with age-related reductions in response speed;
- **allowing flexibility in taking rest breaks** – work and jobs should be designed so that workers are able to vary the timing of their own rest breaks, where practical, to match their individual needs. This helps to compensate, when necessary, for differences in their physical performance capacities that may be related to fitness or general health;

- **scheduling and management of work to reduce the risks** eg improving shift schedules – older workers often experience greater difficulty than younger workers in coping with tiring shift work, particularly night shifts. The design of the shift schedule can significantly affect employee fatigue. It is particularly important for older workers that best practice shift systems be adopted to minimise fatigue levels and associated problems. For further information, see the *Code of practice: Working hours*;
- **reviewing work intensity and scheduling** – work that involves sustaining very fast work rates for extended periods is likely to be stressful and may place workers at risk of musculoskeletal disorders. To deal with excessive workloads:
 - production requirements and workloads should be based on an understanding of the time needed to achieve the required quality, as well as quantity, of work output; and
 - modification of the workload should not be confused with a need to reduce task complexity or make work easier, as older workers' capacity to cope with complex work demands is not reduced and monotonous and very easy work, lacking in challenge, can make people prone to injury; and
- **allowing time to adapt to changing requirements** – when new tasks, equipment or other changes to physical work performance are introduced, allowing adequate time for workers of all ages to learn and adapt is important. They may need to develop the required strength and fitness over a period of several weeks, depending on fitness. As people age, strength does not decrease the same across all muscles and types of movements. Performance requirements should be reduced during the period of learning and adaptation to new requirements.

Reducing physical demands – this can be achieved by developing a safe system of work. Factors to be considered include:

- decreasing the weights and/or sizes of objects lifted;
- minimising their distance from the person lifting them; and/or
- providing mechanical lifting equipment, where practical.

Improving the physical working environment. This may be achieved through:

- minimising glare to deal with susceptibility to its effects eg shielding direct light sources or adjusting reflective surfaces such as computer monitors;
- ensuring good lighting levels;
- minimising noise levels, where possible, as hearing often deteriorates with age and this may mean difficulties in hearing speech in noisy environments;
- eliminating hazards that may cause slips, trips and falls. Solutions include:
 - installation of non-slip floor surfaces;
 - provision of adequate lighting for stairs and corridors;
 - removal of trip hazards such as uneven surfaces;
 - regular review of the working environment to check potential slips, trips and falls hazards; and
 - good housekeeping to quickly remove things like spills and objects on floors;
- making allowances for working in more extreme temperatures. For example, reduce time of exposure and use personal protective equipment; and
- ensuring good visibility of task-related information/objects. This may require:
 - modifying information display characteristics, by for example using larger screen and font sizes;
 - providing contrast with background; and
 - improved task and environmental lighting.

Reducing postural demands eg:

- redesigning work stations, equipment and tasks to optimise posture;
- ensuring work activities, equipment, controls, work items, documents and materials, which are most important, most frequently used or require rapid hand movements, are in front of the employee and within easy reach to minimise stretching and twisting; and
- providing workstation equipment, such as furniture and keyboards, that is adjustable to suit the full range of physical characteristics of individual employees. The aim should be that their location and dimensions in relation to each other and to the worker allow a relaxed working posture with everything within easy reach. Employees must be able to adopt a safe working posture.

Providing training and information where older workers are moved into different work, as these are important for the necessary job skills. In addition, where required:

- self-paced training may be beneficial;
- training to update work skills may also enable transition to other work eg updating computer skills; and
- provision of information in a variety of formats may assist for older workers who have different learning styles.

Supporting flexible employment conditions eg:

- providing for job sharing or part time work so older workers can reduce their risk of injury, sustain their general health and enable transition to retirement and/or meet changing lifestyle needs. For more information, see the mature age fact sheets at www.commerce.wa.gov.au/LabourRelations; and
- in some cases, after an injury, allowing older workers a longer return to work as they may experience slower rehabilitation. When rejoining the workforce, there may be a need for a gradual return to normal working hours and/or modification of duties for an interim period.

Implementing health and lifestyle promotion eg:

- aside from specific safety and health considerations, it could be beneficial to address health, physical activity and lifestyle promotion and, as mentioned above, flexibility of working arrangements; and
- provision of health promotion programs can also help to immunise people against workplace injury by maintaining health and reducing the impact of risk factors.

Resolving issues

Employers have a responsibility to consider age-related factors in providing a safe workplace. If issues cannot be resolved, you should raise them with your safety and health representative (if you have one) and supervisor. If these concerns cannot be resolved, you can make a confidential enquiry with WorkSafe on 1300 307 877.

Other information sources

Publications

Commission for Occupational Safety and Health

Code of practice: Manual tasks

Code of practice: Working hours

Available from the WorkSafe website at www.worksafe.wa.gov.au

Comcare

Productive and safe workplaces for an ageing workforce. This is available at the Australian Public Sector Commission's website at: www.apsc.gov.au

Contacts

Australian Human Rights Commission (for queries in relation to the Commonwealth's *Age Discrimination Act 2004*)
GPO Box 5218
Sydney NSW 2001
Tel: 1300 369 711
Fax: (02) 9284 9611
Email: complaintsinfo@humanrights.gov.au
Internet site: www.hreoc.gov.au

**Chamber of Commerce and Industry
Western Australia**
180 Hay Street
East Perth WA 6004
Tel: (08) 9365 7415
Fax: (08) 9365 7550
Email: osh@cciwa.com
Internet site: www.cciwa.com

**Chamber of Minerals and Energy
of Western Australia**
Level 7, 12 St Georges Terrace
Perth WA 6000
Tel: (08) 9325 2955
Fax: (08) 9221 3701
Email: chamber@cmewa.com
Internet site: www.cmewa.com

Department of Commerce
Labor Relations Division
Tel: Wageline 1300 655 266 for information on employment conditions and wages in the private sector or (08) 9222 7700
Fax: (08) 9222 7777
Email: labourrelations@commerce.wa.gov.au
Internet site: www.commerce.wa.gov.au/LabourRelations

Equal Opportunity Commission
Level 2, Westralia Square
141 St George Terrace
Perth WA 6000
Tel: (08) 9216 3900
Fax: (08) 9216 3960
Email: eoc@eoc.wa.gov.au
Internet site: www.eoc.wa.gov.au

Resources Safety Division
Department of Mines and Petroleum
Level 1, 303 Sevenoaks Street, Cannington
Tel: (08) 9358 8002
Fax: (08) 9358 8000
Email: ResourcesSafety@dmp.wa.gov.au

UnionsWA
Level 4, 445 Hay Street
Perth WA 6000
Tel: (08) 9328 7877
Fax: (08) 9328 8132
Email: unionswa@unionswa.com.au
Internet site: www.unionswa.com.au

Department of **Commerce** WorkSafe Division

Customer Help Centre: 1300 307 877
(for the cost of a local call statewide)

Level 5 Westcentre 1260 Hay Street West Perth Western Australia 6005

Mail: PO Box 294 West Perth Western Australia 6872

Administration: (08) 9327 8777
Facsimile: (08) 9321 8973
National Relay Service: 13 36 77
TTY: (08) 9327 8838

Website: www.worksafe.wa.gov.au
Email: safety@commerce.wa.gov.au

Regional Offices

Great Southern (09) 9842 8366
Mid-West (08) 9964 5644
North-West (08) 9185 0900
South-West (08) 9722 2888

This publication is available on request in other formats to assist people with special needs.