

The positions I take on health related issues are not always consistent with popular belief. This will be no exception. The current topic is workers comp.

The purpose of the workers compensation system is to protect workers who are injured at work and to encourage employers to make their work places more safe. I don't think that there is any question that many important safeguards have been introduced into the workplace as a result of this program. However, as with any government program, abuses abound.

There are obvious abuses to this system. Some involve less ethical employees who fake or exaggerate injuries in order to collect worker's compensation benefits. In other cases, employers skirt their responsibility to adequately care for workers who have a legitimate claim. The abuses I would like to highlight in this article, however, are less clear. These abuses have more to do with perception of causality. What I mean is how much of a "work" injury is truly related to work and work alone.

Some work injuries are obvious. An employee falls off of a ladder or is hit by a moving vehicle or has a limb injured by a piece of machinery. Others are more subtle and are the result of repetitive activities that cause gradual damage to the body. These injuries are often attributed to work activities, yet they are almost always not exclusively linked to work.

The human body is always in a state of damage and repair. Daily activities damage the body. At night when we sleep, the body enters a repair state. If the amount of damage we expose our bodies too does not exceed our ability to heal and repair, then we will have no significant residual effects. In many cases, however, our ability to repair lags behind the stresses we place upon our bodies. In these cases, damage accumulates and eventually results in a diagnosable condition. Typical conditions that are the result of accumulated damage include carpal tunnel syndrome, tendinitis, bursitis, most arthritis, and most back and neck problems.

If the symptom begins at work, it is assumed that the condition responsible for the symptom is work related. This isn't often the case. There are a wide variety of factors that contribute to the accumulation of body damage. All activities, both in and out of work, stress the body and contribute to damage. In addition, our ability to heal properly is related to other things such as nutrition, stress, smoking habits, drinking habits, etc.

When body tissue is damaged, it is repaired and rebuilt out of the nutrients that come from our food. If we eat poorly then we make poor quality tissues. Smoking reduces the oxygen content of our blood and oxygen is necessary for energy production. Healing requires energy, so smoking can reduce the healing ability of the body. Stress reduces the normal repair process as well. Eating poorly, smoking, and experiencing frequent stress will all reduce the healing ability of the body and allow daily damage to accumulate. Healing is also regulated by the nerve system, so problems in the spine where the nerves originate, can reduce the healing ability of the body.

As a result of all these factors, it is unrealistic to blame our work as the sole cause of repetitive stress injuries. Yes employers should place importance on making their work places more safe, but we are all personally responsible for our own health. The choices and actions each of us make in our life, on and off the job, influence our health and well-being.

If you are an employer and would like this message shared with your employees as well as specific instruction on how your workers can help reduce repetitive stress injuries, contact me at my office and arrange for me to come to your business.