

Get Seriously Injured on the Job, Die Sooner?



Getting seriously injured on the job is bad enough. But according to a study from the Institute for Work & Health (IWH), people who are permanently impaired by work-related injury also face a greater risk of dying early—a risk that remains more than a decade after the injury.

The study, 'Long-term mortality risk in individuals with permanent work-related impairment,' also found that although young workers can more easily recover from a work-related injury, the highest jump in mortality risks are those faced by people who are permanently impaired following a work injury in their younger years.

The researchers linked data kept by Statistics Canada with another database held by the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board, Ontario's workers' comp agency. They took a sample of 19,000 Ontarians whose work-related injury left them permanently impaired and followed their outcomes for up to 19 years.

To set up a comparison or control group, the study team paired each individual in the injured sample with up to 10 other people who didn't experience a work injury but shared similar characteristics such as age, sex, region of residence and income level.

Key findings from the study:

- The overall rate of death in men with permanent impairments was 14% compared to 9% per cent in the non-injured control group, representing a 55% higher risk of mortality.
- For women, the death rate among those with permanent impairments was 6% compared to 4% in non-injured controls—a 50% higher risk of mortality.
- For both men and women, a disabling injury at a young age (25 to 39) meant a higher likelihood of premature death.
- This higher risk of death showed up most starkly a decade or more after the injury, with the divergence in death rates peaking after 13 years in women and 15 years in men.

The higher risks of death persisted even after controlling for multiple factors that can bear on risk of death, such as age, income and marital status. Accounting for such factors, the study found that impaired women still faced an almost 30% higher risk of dying during the follow-up period compared to their non-impaired counterparts, while impaired men still had a 22% higher risk of dying.

Work disability's difficulty staying in the labour market was found to play a key role in this increased mortality risk.

IWH Associate Scientist Dr. Heather Scott-Marshall, who led the study, explained that work disability stems from the physical, psychological and emotional difficulties individuals experience coping with, or adapting to, an acquired impairment. These difficulties can affect their sense of self and create problems with social role functioning, such as how they fulfil their roles as a worker, spouse, parent, etc.

'This, in turn, can affect their ability to re-enter the labour market after an injury and may compromise long-term employment success,' says Scott-Marshall. Other key factors contributing to work disability include stigma and discrimination against workers with impairment, which have been shown to affect opportunities in the labour market.

The researchers found that women with a work-related permanent impairment who experienced no or low work disability (i.e. who earned at least 75% of their pre-injury income) were 27% less likely to die in the follow-up period than women with high work disability (those earning less than 25% of their pre-injury income). Among men with impairments, those with no or low work disability were 38% less likely to die than those with high work disability.

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