

Tips for Protecting Older Workers on the Job



People are working longer and retiring later. As a result, the workforce is getting older. And older workers may face additional health and safety hazards on the job.

For example, workers age 50 or older may start to experience decreased muscular strength, reduced range of movement and more vulnerability to extreme temperatures. (OHS Insider has [additional information](#) on some of the health and safety issues raised by older workers. And Pro members can watch this [recorded webinar](#) on ergonomic design for the aging workforce.)

The [NIOSH Science Blog](#) recently looked at some of the health and safety challenges posed by an aging workforce. It notes that many effective workplace solutions to safety hazards faced by older workers are simple, don't have to cost a lot and can have big benefits if implemented properly with worker input and support throughout all levels of management.

It suggests the following strategies for preparing your workplace for an older and healthier, safer workforce:

- Prioritize workplace flexibility. Workers prefer jobs that offer more flexibility over those that offer more vacation days. To the extent possible, give workers a say in their schedule and work conditions, organization, location and tasks.
- Match tasks to abilities. Use self-paced work, self-directed rest breaks and less repetitive tasks

- Avoid prolonged, sedentary work because it's bad for workers at every age. Consider sit/stand workstations and walking workstations for workers who traditionally sit all day. Provide onsite physical activity opportunities or connections to low-cost community options.
- Manage noise hazards (including excess background noise), slip/trip hazards and physical hazards—conditions that can challenge an aging workforce more.
- Provide ergonomic work environments, including workstations, tools, floor surfaces, adjustable seating, better illumination where needed, and screens and surfaces with less glare.
- Utilize teams and teamwork strategies for aging-associated problem solving. Workers closest to the problem are often best equipped to find the fix.
- Provide wellness interventions, such as physical activity, healthy meal options, smoking cessation assistance, risk factor reduction and screenings, coaching and onsite medical care. Accommodate medical self-care in the workplace and time away for health visits.
- Invest in training and building worker skills and competencies at all age levels. Help older employees adapt to new technologies, often a concern for employers and older workers.
- Proactively manage reasonable accommodations and the return-to-work process after illness or injury absences.
- Require aging workforce management skills training for supervisors. Include a focus on the most effective ways to manage a multi-generational workplace.