

Beyond The Cab

The only safety management newsletter dedicated exclusively to addressing injury prevention and workers' compensation cost control for trucking companies.



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Issue 10, Volume 2004

Bigger is Not Necessarily Better

Without beating around the bush, obesity is a problem within the trucking industry. In fact, one study indicates that obesity among commercial truck drivers is approximately twice that of the general population. That may not come as a surprise to you. In fact you may have even come to accept overweight drivers to be an inevitable reality. After all, many drivers lead a fairly sedentary existence. Most are no longer involved in fingerprinting freight, and the opportunities to eat calorie and fat-laden food far outweigh the opportunity for choosing wise food alternatives.

Obviously this is a problem. But is the girth of drivers really a problem that should directly concern you as a safety director? Furthermore, what does obesity have to do with workers' compensation?

Obesity is well-established as a risk factor for cardiovascular disease, hypertension, diabetes and stroke. On the surface, these things (although serious health problems) appear to have little to do with workers' compensation. After all, the onset of any one of these diseases could hardly be tagged as a workers' compensation claim. However, if you're willing to dig just a little deeper, a disturbing connection between obesity and workers' compensation becomes plainly evident.

Take for example, diabetes (a condition with strong ties to obesity). People who suffer from that illness require a longer time to recover from an injury (to include work-related injuries), which can easily translate into increased medical costs and more sustained wage-replacement benefits. However, it is not a problem limited to those afflicted with diabetes. Studies by disability insurers have found that among those with musculo-skeletal connective tissue ailments, people who are obese need an alarming 7.5 times more medical services. It is even conceivable for doctors to prescribe a weight-reduction program for overweight claimants with back or knee injuries before agreeing to perform surgery.

According to Don R. Powell, president of the American Institute for Preventive Medicine, people who are overweight and physically unfit are also more prone to work accidents. This should not come as a surprise to anyone who is familiar with the activities of a driver outside of his truck. Tasks such as climbing up and down the steps of a truck; getting in and out of a trailer in the absence of a dock; and crouching to pull the fifth wheel release or tandem slider, are tasks that are best suited for someone who is physically fit.

With the connection between obesity and increased workers' compensation costs brought into the light, the pertinent question is simple, "What are you going to do about it?" Of course you can treat the issue in the manner as it has been treated throughout the industry in the past... ignore it. Or, you can make an intentional decision to cut the fat.



If you decide to do the latter, a wellness program with a strong concentration on weight-control will very likely become an element of your company's loss control program. Such a program often includes extensive wellness education for drivers, routine wellness examinations, and access to employee wellness assistance programs.

In the event that you are not yet convinced that driver wellness is an issue for the company's safety director, be aware that there's an emergence of research showing that companies that include weight control, reduce their workers' comp claims costs and disability days. Additionally, obesity is a prime risk factor for sleep apnea. Furthermore, wellness programs make employees feel valued, increasing job-satisfaction and morale and decreasing employee turnover.