Ergonomics Risk Reduction Strategies In Healthcare

Working in hospitals, long-term care facilities, and other healthcare environments can place high physical demands on workers. This work often requires manual handling, forceful exertions, and awkward postures, typically over the course of a 12-hour shift. The presence and combination of these musculoskeletal disorder hazards contributes to the risk of injury. There are several ergonomics initiatives that healthcare organizations should consider to reduce employee injury risk.

Ensuring a Foundation for Success

The first step is ensuring your organization has a solid Ergonomics Program to identify hazards and to implement risk mitigation controls. This does not require a stand-alone program, but rather incorporating ergonomics into your existing Health & Safety Program, by including the identification and control of ergonomics hazards into your existing policies and practices. Your Ergonomics Program should include Policies and Procedures which outline the roles and responsibilities of all parties, processes for identifying and addressing hazards, reporting concerns, purchasing new equipment, designing new workstations, etc. A successful Program requires management commitment, to ensure appropriate resource allocation, and worker participation, to promote hazard identification, reporting, awareness and ownership/buy-in by adopting best work practices.

Identifying Hazards in Healthcare

High forces, awkward postures, and repetitive work, performed over 12-hour shifts are common in many healthcare roles. The first step to reducing the risks associated with these hazards, is a formalized hazard identification process. As a starting point, having qualified Joint Health & Safety Committee members perform hazard screening can identify where hazards exist, and start the brainstorming process of possible risk reduction solutions. For more complex issues, a trained expert may be required to help determine root causes and identify effective controls. Reviewing injury statistics and staff discomfort surveys can help to identify existing hazards, while the review of new equipment, processes, and workstations can identify potential hazards proactively.

Risk Reduction Strategies – Engineering Controls, Education & Training

Engineering controls are one of the most effective methods for reducing injury risk. Examples of engineering controls include patient handling devices, adjustable mops, and ergonomic chairs. However, implementing engineering controls without education and training is like handing a new vehicle to someone without the user's manual. Teaching employees how and when to use equipment and aides is just as important as providing the equipment itself, and critical to ensuring the most benefit from your investment. Employees need to know how to select the most appropriate equipment for a task, as well as ergonomic use and operation of that equipment.

Training is a crucial part of risk reduction in healthcare, and should come in the form of general training, as well as job-specific, hands-on practical training. Employees need to be educated and empowered to improve their work by teaching them how to identify hazards in their own jobs and how to report them. General training should include topics such as: roles and responsibilities of all parties, understanding and identifying hazards, reporting hazards or injuries, ergonomics awareness and best practices, and available controls. Job-specific training should be customized to the job role e.g. safe patient handling for Nursing staff, manual materials handling for Housekeeping and Facilities staff, computer workstation set-up for office staff, Ergonomic Screening for JHSC members, and so on. This training needs to include optimal postures and techniques for using job-specific equipment, as well as strategies for adapting technique based on staff and patient abilities or specific scenarios, such as bariatric patient care.

Numerous options for training exist, including small group staff training and Train-the-Trainer programs, where in-house trainers are provided with the knowledge to train staff. Ideally, training should be delivered in-person, with hands-on practice of real work scenarios, and immediate coaching and feedback from trained in-house or external experts. Training could be delivered upon hire, as well as on an ongoing basis in the form of refresher training. Additional training tools such as self-assessment checklists, equipment adjustment videos, and toolbox talks can be used to complement hands-on training and provide physical resources for employees.

Best Work Practices

Identifying best work practices for jobs with identified hazards helps to standardize work and ensure staff are following the safest procedures. Like most things, best work practices are not always "one size fits all", and it is important to consider individual differences and variations in performance, which may mean having more than one best practice for a specific task. Best practice at its' root is not just about having a policy, it is about identifying the best postures and techniques for performing a task, and communicating that knowledge to staff. For patient-handling roles, this could include policies and training around ceiling lifts and other lift / transfer aides, when and how they are to be used, and proper ergonomic use. For Housekeeping roles, best practices could include procedures on mop selection for different areas and types of cleaning, and training on proper mopping technique. For office roles, best work practices could include policies for purchasing new chairs, and mandatory staff training on chair adjustment.

Easy Fixes

After building your Ergonomics program and identifying hazards, knowing where to begin can feel overwhelming. Consider starting with some “easy fixes” or “low-hanging fruit” to help build momentum, gain buy-in and employee participation, and celebrate successes. Train employees on proper ergonomic use of existing equipment. Teach employees how to set-up their computer workstations, including those staff at Nurses’ stations. Implement a wheel tagging / maintenance program to help reduce push/pull forces on carts, stretchers, and medical equipment. Look at your materials storage – move your heaviest items to bottom and middle shelves, and your lightest items to top shelves. Have ergo contests, where staff submit ideas to address hazards and prizes are awarded to the winning solution.

Like with any program, remember to track progress and audit your program to identify gaps and opportunities for improvement. Good ergonomics can help make good healthcare by protecting staff so they can focus on their patients.

Please contact ERGO Inc. today for ergonomic assistance with your program development, training, or any of your ergonomic or injury management needs.

Healthy Workers add up to Healthy Profits ™

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