



## Sore Points

STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH EMPLOYEES WHO ENDURE CHRONIC PAIN. BY CHRIS MACDONALD

With an aging workforce and related costs (i.e., medical costs and lost productivity) estimated to be greater than \$6 billion annually to the economy, it's no wonder chronic pain has become a hot topic of discussion. The Canadian Pain Society reports that chronic pain affects 20% to 30% of Canadians. Considering the potential costs to an employer in relation to chronic pain, these statistics may seem daunting. The good news is that there are many proactive strategies an employer and employee can put in place to mitigate rising costs—and prevent lost time at, and from, work.

Chronic pain is a term used to classify persistent, non-acute pain that can be associated with an injury or chronic condition or have no known origin. It can impact not only physical functioning but also mental health. Many individuals with chronic pain report having a higher prevalence of mood and anxiety disorders. Data from the 2007/08 Statistics Canada *Community Health Survey*, for example, indicate that 20.5% of females ages 12 to 44 with chronic pain report a mood disorder, and 18% report having an anxiety disorder. In comparison, of those in the same demographic *without* chronic pain, 6% report either a mood or anxiety disorder.

The survey also indicates that 63% of chronic pain sufferers say pain prevents them from regularly fulfilling everyday tasks at home, school and work, although it also found that workers with chronic pain reported they were no more likely than those without chronic pain to be absent from their jobs. With evidence to suggest that individuals with chronic pain struggle with tasks at work, here are some proactive strategies that employers can use to support employees dealing with this health issue.

**Become informed** – There are a multitude of resources available online that will assist managers in understanding and more effectively dealing with employees who experience chronic pain. The Canadian Pain Society's website, for example, features educational materials on different pain disorders.

**Communicate with your employees** – While employees are not obligated to share information regarding medical conditions with their employers, it is important that employers work with their employees to understand their functional abilities. If an employer demonstrates open communication, employees dealing with chronic pain may be more likely to discuss their conditions and needs.

**Involve employees in the solutions** – By asking employees for potential solutions, the employer empowers them to become part of the process. By opening lines of communication with their employees, employers can increase the chances of brainstorming real, implementable solutions that work for both employer and employee.

**Think outside the box** – Be creative when coming up with solutions. Often, simple modifications to an office or workstation can help relieve chronic pain—for example, a location that allows an employee to stretch on the floor multiple times throughout the day may help in some cases. A little creative thinking can draw out the best solutions.

**Monitor the solution** – Once a solution has been determined and implemented, the employer needs to reconnect with employees to make sure they require no further adjustments.

Employers are increasingly looking for opportunities to support their employees by introducing healthier solutions into workplaces. Offering easy access to evidence-based online research such as a medical conditions database, appropriate drug medication treatments or even specialized experts can give employees education tools not otherwise readily available to them. For chronic pain, proactive intervention could mean reinforcing an employee's lifestyle choices such as nutrition and exercise.

The success of an employer's organization depends on the well-being of its employees. Employers should consult with providers and specialists to develop targeted solutions and strategies related to chronic pain management. **BC**

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