

Health Promotion / Wellness / Psychosocial

Aging Workers

On this page

[Why should a workplace look at issues concerning aging workers?](#)

[Who is considered to be an older worker?](#)

[Do aging workers need any accommodations?](#)

[Are there any specific health and safety concerns related to aging workers?](#)

[Are there any concerns about older workers' work performance?](#)

[What physical changes occur, in general, as a person ages... and how can this affect their work?](#)

[What changes occur with learning or cognitive functions?](#)

[Are training requirements different for older workers?](#)

[How can a workplace help?](#)

Why should a workplace look at issues concerning aging workers?

Canada's population is aging due to longer life expectancy, low birth rates, and the aging of the "baby boomers". These facts are having an impact on both the age distribution in the workforce and the size of the retired population.

Statistics Canada (2019) states that from 1996 to 2018:

- The proportion of workers in Canada aged 55 and older increased from 10% to 21% of the workforce.
- The ratio of older (55 and over) to younger (25 to 34) workers is near parity

An aging workforce is affecting all occupations, although there are differences in the extent and pace of aging in different sectors.

The number of older workers who work part-time or have other flexible work arrangements is also increasing.

Who is considered to be an older worker?

There is no exact, commonly recognized age at which someone is considered an older worker. Most studies have focused on people older than 55, while other studies examined those 45 years or older, or 65 years or older.

Do aging workers need any accommodations?

Yes and no. A well-designed work place benefits everyone. Workstations and job tasks that are matched to the needs of the individual worker are always best. Different conditions for different workers may be needed to meet the needs of any worker, not just one that is older.

However, that being said, there are some things older workers may need to work safely and comfortably.

Are there any specific health and safety concerns related to aging workers?

A few. Many studies say that older workers tend to have fewer accidents workplace related injuries, but when an older worker does get injured, they may take longer to get better.

Many workplace injuries are the result of doing the same things again and again. Repetitive motion injuries, for example, develop over time. An older worker, then, may report more musculoskeletal injuries since they've had longer for the condition to develop.

When the physical demands of the job exceed the capabilities of the worker, regardless of age, there is a risk for injury. Because older workers tend to require more time to recover when an injury occurs, it's important to have a return-to-work program, and to make reasonable adjustments to the job or work station so they are as safe as possible.

Workplaces should also be aware that occupational diseases caused by long term (chronic) exposure to hazardous products such as asbestos, silica or noise have a long latency period. The occupational illness may occur many years after exposure to the hazardous product. Mesothelioma and asbestosis are examples of occupational illnesses that have a long latency period and can affect older workers who were exposed to asbestos earlier in their career. As a result, it is important for employers to control exposure to hazardous substances at all stages.

Are there any concerns about older workers' work performance?

In general, studies report that older workers exhibit lower turnover and more dedication to the workplace. Absenteeism is less frequent, although it is longer when it is due to injury or chronic illness.

Studies have not shown there is any consistent relationship between aging and performance at work. The main reasons for poor work performance are:

- lack of recognition and feeling as if their work isn't valued;
- not getting along with supervisors;
- high job stress;
- lack of support.

It is important to remember that these situations which may lead to poor work performance can happen at any age.

What physical changes occur, in general, as a person ages... and how can this affect their work?

Our bodies change as gradually as we age. The changes with age occur in everyone, but not necessarily at the same rate.

Changes that occur during aging include:

- **Muscular strength and range of joint movement:** In general, people lose approximately 15 to 20% of their strength from the ages of 30 to 60. However, every person is different and there is a large range between individuals at any age. It must also be considered that most jobs do not require a person to use all of their strength. Older workers may be able to perform the same tasks as younger workers, but they may be working closer to their maximum level. The musculoskeletal system weakens over time, resulting in a decreased capacity for load-bearing work. Keep in mind that, for example, highly repetitive motions – doing the same thing, over and over again – can cause physical problems at any age.

As we age, the body loses some 'range of motion' and flexibility. People may be used to certain range of movements at one task or workstation. Being less flexible or able to reach could cause problems in some unpredictable situations that require unusual movements.

- **Cardiovascular and respiratory systems:** The ability of the heart, lungs and circulatory system to carry oxygen decreases. Between the age of 30 and 65, the functional breathing capacity can reduce by 40%. These changes can affect the ability to do extended heavy physical labour and reduce the body's ability to adjust to hot and cold conditions.
- **Regulation of posture and balance:** In general people may find it harder to maintain good posture and balance. When seated or standing still, this may not be a problem. However, incidents may happen because someone loses their balance. Work that requires precise adjustments, strong muscular effort (including lifting and carrying), joint movements at extreme angles, or those done on a slippery or unstable surface will be affected by poorer posture.
- **Sleep Regulation:** As we age, our body is not able to regulate sleep as well as it used to. How long a person sleeps, and how well they sleep, can additionally be disrupted by changing work hours or by light and noise. The impact on workers is especially a concern for older shift or night workers. Use of shift rotations that are the least disruptive to sleep patterns are preferred.
- **Thermoregulation (Body Temperature):** Our bodies are less able to maintain internal temperatures as well as less able to adjust to changes in external temperature or due to physical activity. This change means that older workers may find heat or cold more difficult to deal with than when they were younger.
- **Vision:** Vision changes with age. We will notice we cannot see or read from certain distances as well as we used to. This reduction in the "amplitude of accommodation" (the ability to see or adjust focus in certain distance ranges) is normal and is usually corrected with prescription glasses. Changes also occur in the peripheral visual field (how well you can see in the areas to the side of you, that you're not directly looking at), visual acuity (how exact, clear, and "unfuzzy" things appear), depth perception (how far away things seem), and resistance to glare, and light transmission. These changes are normally not noticed by a person unless there is poor lighting or there are sources of glare. Someone might also notice that they can't see as well when they're reading something when text size is small, or when there is poor contrast between the text and the background. Adequate lighting (that is suitable for the task) should be provided. Shadows and glare should be reduced to a minimum. Well laid-out documents which avoid small print are also important.

- **Auditory (Hearing):** Hearing also changes. We may not be able to hear as well at higher frequencies (high pitch sounds). Most often, this change is noticed as the inability to listen to a particular voice or sound in a noisy environment. As well, people who work with a lot of background noise may have difficulty hearing verbal instructions.
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What changes occur with learning or cognitive functions?

Changes in mental capacity also occur as a person ages. Older people may not think as quickly and clearly as they once did. Also, it may take longer to learn new skills. Much of the research on cognitive functioning (how people think and how quickly they do it) has been done in laboratory settings. As a result, there is information available on how individuals score on specific tests or tasks. However, there has been little testing to see how these results apply in the "real world". In particular, at work people naturally develop different habits to match or suit their learning and working styles.

Generally speaking, fluid intelligence (such as inductive reasoning, selective attention, 'dual-task' activities, and information processing) declines with age, while verbal tasks and vocabulary (talking and expressing themselves) remain constant or improve.

Tasks that depend on short-term memory usually take longer. Older workers tend to use experience and expertise when working and may find it hard to work with complex or confusing stimuli. This factors means they might find it hard to do tasks in which they have to do (or think) a lot of different things quickly or at one time. They may also find it tricky to work in a busy environment where lots is going on. They may be less able to focus attention only on information relevant to the task at hand, especially in "new" situations. This factor means that there may be so much going on in new situations that they aren't sure what to prioritize, what to pay attention to, and what to ignore.

Are training requirements different for older workers?

Training requirements may be different for older workers. Since learning is based on previous experience, training may need to be more "practically" based. New skills need to be explained in a way that fits into what they already know. Justification and the logic behind the information – why you're doing what you're doing – are more important. Training may take longer than with younger workers. There may also be a need for more assistance or practice. However, several studies show that there may not be a difference in how well someone works once the learning curve has been reached.

Everyone, at every age, thinks and learns differently. These cognitive functions – how someone learns and thinks – are very dependent on the individual, and the experiences they have had during their lifetime. People who have had a lot of training or education over their lifetime, or who have had to carry out a variety of tasks, are experienced learners. They are typically able to learn new skills well and improve the ones they have with ease. People who may be more resistant to learning as an older adult include those who have little formal training or who have carried out relatively simple or repetitive tasks for many years. They are used to doing the same thing, the same way, and may find it hard to take in new information or ways of doing things.

How can a workplace help?

Long-term health issues increase with age. At the same time, mental and physical fitness are closely linked. Workplaces can help by providing a safe work environment that reduces the chance of injury or occupational illness. These steps include, for example, having equipment in good working condition, training, safe work procedures, low chemical and hazard exposure, supportive management styles, risk assessments that take into account aging factors, etc. Workplaces can also help by having workplace health promotion initiatives (active living, healthy eating, stress awareness, violence prevention programs, etc.).

Workplace controls can reduce exposure to hazardous substances. Follow legislative requirements in your jurisdiction and ensure that occupational exposure limits are not exceeded. Use [hierarchy of control](#) measures to eliminate or reduce exposures.

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