



# Obesity Increases on the Job Injuries

By Margaret Gaglione, M.D.

Those extra pounds are hurting both the employees and employers. According to several recent studies, being overweight and obese places employees at tremendous risk for job-related injuries. The financial cost to the individual, many of whom do not have disability insurance, can be devastating. For the employer, the larger financial picture may be even bleaker. Overweight and obese employees will decrease your profits as you cover the cost of workman's compensation and employee absenteeism.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, more than two-thirds of our

nation's adults are currently overweight or obese. These numbers will undoubtedly get worse given that 15-25% of our children are also overweight and obese. Several recent studies have highlighted the economic cost of the rampant obesity epidemic.

Researchers at Johns Hopkins recently published a study in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* looking at 7,690 manufacturing workers at eight U.S. aluminum plants. In the two years of the study from 2002 to 2004, 29% of the workers were injured at least once on the job. Of the 2,221 injured workers, an astounding 85% of them were overweight and obese.

One might say that manufacturing companies are an exception to on the job injuries just by the nature of the laborious work. In an article published

in the Archives of Internal Medicine, Duke University researchers looked at their own hospital employees over a seven year period of time. They found that overweight and obese employees filed twice the number of workers' compensation claims, and those claims amounted to seven times the amount of normal weight workman's compensation claims. On average, the medical claim of an overweight or obese employee was \$51,000 as compared to \$7,500 for a normal weight employee. As expected,

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the cost extends beyond the medical claim. The overweight and obese employee had 13 times the number of days absent as compared with the normal weight employee.

Not surprising, most of these injuries were mechanical in nature. Duke researchers found that the lower extremity, hand, wrist and lower back were the most common workman's compensation injuries.

The lower extremities bear the brunt of the weight burden. Our knees are not designed to withstand the forces placed on them by obesity. And the effect is exponential. When we walk, we place the equivalent of four times our weight on our knees; multiply that by seven when you walk downstairs or run. Therefore, a 250 lb. individual places 1,000 lbs. of pressure on their knees when they are

walking and 1,750 lbs. on their knees when walking down stairs. Have that employee carry 100 lbs. on their back and you can easily see why mechanical injuries occur.

Employees and employers have to get serious about weight loss and prevention of further weight gain. The military has a long history of administrative separations for failure to maintain body composition standards. We are not far from time when other employers will follow suit. The law will probably fall

on the side of the employer. The courts have already determined that for most, obesity will not be considered a

disability. In a case involving a dock worker, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit held that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) does not cover individuals with morbid obesity not related to a physiological cause.

Employees and employers both win when companies are proactive in fighting this epidemic. Programs and standards that mandate health and weight standards for all workers will be beneficial to everyone.

*Dr. Gaglione is the medical director of Tidewater Bariatrics in Chesapeake, a practice that is dedicated to the care of overweight and obese patients. She is a board-certified internal medicine physician and bariatric specialist. She can be reached at 644-6819 or [www.tidewater-bariatrics.com](http://www.tidewater-bariatrics.com). ■*