

**WORK SAFE. FOR LIFE.**  
WORKERS' COMPENSATION BOARD OF NOVA SCOTIA

Direct Access to **Physiotherapy**

# An Employer's Guide

to Early Assessment of  
Sprains and Strains at Work



Nova Scotians – safe and secure from workplace injury



**A**S AN EMPLOYER, you play a key role in creating a safe working environment and ensuring your workers go home safe. When an injury occurs, helping the worker get back to work as soon as it is safe is an important part of injury recovery.

Direct Access to Physiotherapy gives injured workers who have experienced a strain or sprain injury more timely access to the health care services they need, allowing the return-to-work process to begin right away. This is good for you, your worker and their family, the workers' compensation system and for the Nova Scotia economy. It can lead to more productivity and a healthier workforce, and it can also help keep your claims cost down.

*An Employer's Guide to Early Assessment of Sprains and Strains at Work* explains Direct Access to Physiotherapy, your role in it and the involvement of the worker, physiotherapist, doctor and WCB case worker.

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## What is Direct Access to Physiotherapy?

The most common workplace injuries in Nova Scotia are sprains and strains – stretched ligaments and overexerted muscles. They may be caused by a number of work-related tasks such as lifting, twisting and pulling with the body.

If a worker experiences a sprain or strain on the job, they can go directly to a physiotherapist for an assessment. Once the injury has been assessed, the physiotherapist will determine if the worker can return to work right away or if physiotherapy treatment is necessary.

The WCB has a list of approved physiotherapists who are well-informed on the workers' compensation system, including return to work and the claims process.

As an employer, you may decide to establish a working relationship with a WCB-approved physiotherapist as part of your return-to-work program. You can encourage your worker to go to this clinic, or you can recommend an approved physiotherapist from our list, available at [www.wcb.ns.ca/phyio](http://www.wcb.ns.ca/phyio), or by calling 1.800.870.3331. The worker does have the right, however, to attend an approved physiotherapist of their choosing.

A worker may choose to see their family doctor as well. But, the assessment with the physiotherapist should not be delayed because they are waiting for an appointment with their doctor. The priority is early assessment – to assess the injury and the worker's capacity for returning to work in a safe and timely manner. The physiotherapist will share the results of the assessment with the worker's family doctor.

When an injury occurs on the job, it is important to provide appropriate health care. The type of health care required depends on the severity of the injury. For injuries more serious than a sprain or strain, including, for example, serious cuts, crush injuries, falls, eye injuries, exposures, broken bones or head injuries, the worker should immediately go to the hospital or doctor. For minor injuries, basic health care or on-site first aid treatment may be required. When in doubt, send the worker to the hospital.

## Scenario 1

Jim works in the shipping department for a food wholesaler. While lifting a box to check the date imprint and colour codes on some inventory, he hurts his lower back. His supervisor sends him to the local physiotherapist and submits an Injury Report to the WCB that afternoon.

The physiotherapist diagnoses Jim with muscle strain. The assessment shows that Jim is unable to perform his regular work, but can safely perform other job duties. The physiotherapist contacts Jim's supervisor and submits an assessment of Jim's abilities to the WCB, the employer and to Jim's doctor.

Working with the WCB case worker, the physiotherapist and the doctor, Jim's supervisor is able to provide meaningful transitional duties that match his abilities and Jim avoids missing any time from work. Jim continues to work full-time performing transitional duties, and attends physiotherapy three times a week for two weeks. Jim's supervisor monitors his work to ensure he is not doing more than he can safely perform.

After six treatments, Jim's physiotherapist performs another functional assessment. The assessment shows Jim is able to safely perform all of his job demands and he returns to his regular job. At work, the lighting has been improved so Jim is now able to easily see the colour coding without having to lift boxes. After working a week at his regular job, Jim is reassessed by his physiotherapist. His assessment is normal and no further treatment is required. Jim's WCB claim is closed.

## Why Physiotherapy?

As primary health care professionals, physiotherapists have the expertise and hands-on clinical skills to assess, diagnose and treat sprains and strains. They are trained in assessing how the body moves, what keeps it from moving well and how to restore mobility. Based on their assessment, they can determine if it is safe for a worker to go back to their regular work or to transitional duties.

Their knowledge also ensures that any problems identified beyond the scope of their training are directed to the worker's doctor.

### Scenario 2

Donna works on a production line, packing flats of blueberries for shipment. For two weeks, she has been experiencing right-sided pain in her mid to lower back. Donna assumes it's related to her work activities – she does a lot of reaching – and continues to work. When the pain starts getting worse, a workplace friend suggests she talk to their supervisor. Donna speaks to her supervisor about the pain she's experiencing. Her supervisor suggests she go see the physiotherapy clinic familiar with their workplace return-to-work program, and faxes an Injury Report to the WCB.

Donna prefers to have the physical abilities assessment at another WCB-approved clinic, where she already has a relationship. During the assessment, Donna's physiotherapist notes that she has a normal examination, with a full range of motion – none of the assessment exercises change the pain in anyway. The physiotherapist determines this is not a sprain or strain and sends Donna to her doctor, who diagnoses her with kidney stones. No physiotherapy treatment is required. Donna's WCB claim is closed as this is not a work-related injury.

## How it Works

You or a WCB case worker will send the injured worker to a physiotherapist for an assessment. This assessment will occur within three days of the injury. Ideally, it will happen on the same day.

At the clinic, a physiotherapist performs what's called a *physical abilities assessment*. This is a series of activities that allows the physiotherapist to find out what job tasks – lifting, carrying, walking, etc. – the worker can safely perform.

The physiotherapist will not ask the worker to do anything unsafe. The focus of this evaluation is to assess the injury and determine their capacity for returning to work, either to their regular job or to transitional duties.



The physiotherapist will tell the worker about their injury, diagnosis and, if required, a treatment plan. They will also help the worker understand what to expect during treatment. The physiotherapist will contact you for additional information on the worker's job duties before submitting their report to you, the worker's doctor and to the WCB.

If what the worker can safely do matches the demands of their work, the worker can return to their regular job right away.

If the worker is unable to return to their regular job right away, the physiotherapist will work in collaboration with you, your worker, the worker's doctor and the WCB case worker to develop an appropriate return-to-work plan, including what transitional duties, if any, can be provided.

If the physiotherapist suspects the injury is more serious than a sprain or strain, the worker will be sent to their doctor.

### Scenario 3

Cory works in the retail industry stocking shelves. While carrying a box of product, he trips over a power cord and twists his ankle. He immediately experiences pain in his right ankle area. Cory's manager sends him directly to a physiotherapy clinic familiar with their workplace and electronically files an Injury Report with the WCB. The assessment finds that Cory has a limited range of motion in his right ankle, along with tenderness and swelling in the area.

Suspecting the injury may be more than a sprain and concerned about the possibility of a fracture, the physiotherapist instructs Cory to go directly to the local emergency department. An X-ray shows Cory has fractured a bone in his ankle. He gets a cast, which he has to wear for several weeks. Cory continues to work as his manager is able to find suitable transitional work.



## Frequently Asked Questions

### What if I want to establish a working relationship with a physiotherapist of my choosing?

You may decide to establish a working relationship with a physiotherapist approved by the WCB as part of your return-to-work program. The list of physiotherapists approved by the WCB is available on our website, at [www.wcb.ns.ca/physio](http://www.wcb.ns.ca/physio), or by calling 1.800.870.3331.

### Why does the worker have to go to a physiotherapist approved by the WCB?

The physiotherapists approved by the WCB are knowledgeable on the workers' compensation system, including the claims process and related forms. They are required by the WCB to assess an injury within three days.

### Can I direct the worker to go to a physiotherapist of my choosing?

You may encourage the worker to go to an approved physiotherapist of your choosing. However, a worker has the right to attend an approved physiotherapy clinic of their choice.

### What if the worker wants to go see their doctor?

The worker might decide to see their family doctor. The physical abilities assessment should not be delayed because they are waiting for an appointment with their doctor.

### What if I send a worker to a physiotherapist and the injury turns out to be something other than a sprain or strain?

If the physiotherapist determines the injury is something other than a sprain or strain, the physiotherapist will immediately send the worker to the hospital.

### What if I am unsure of the severity of the injury?

If you are in doubt as to the severity of the injury, send the worker to the hospital right away.

### Who determines the return-to-work plan?

Working together, you, the WCB case worker, the worker and the physiotherapist will help determine the return-to-work plan, including transitional duties. The worker's family doctor may also provide input.

### What if the worker's doctor and physiotherapist disagree with the diagnosis or treatment plan?

Every situation is different. Contact the WCB case worker if there is any disagreement or if you have any questions or concerns.

### What are transitional duties?

When a worker cannot safely return to their regular duties because of a workplace injury, other duties may be assigned. Transitional duties may include the elimination of some duties, a combination of their regular work and new duties, perhaps reduced work hours with ease back to full hours, or any combination of these transitional duties.

### Where do I find the forms I need to fill out?

Forms and information related to Direct Access to Physiotherapy are available on our website, at [www.wcb.ns.ca/physio](http://www.wcb.ns.ca/physio), or by calling 1.800.870.3331. Details on how to complete the required sections of the PT Intake Report – Form A can be found in the *Employer Information Guide*. Both it and the WCB Injury Report are also available on our website.

## Employer's Need-to-Know Checklist

- Send the worker who has experienced a workplace sprain or strain to a WCB-approved physiotherapist for an assessment. Complete the first two sections of the PT Intake Report – Form A (available at [www.wcb.ns.ca/physio](http://www.wcb.ns.ca/physio)) and send it to the physiotherapist, or have the worker take it with them to the clinic.
- Report the injury to the WCB as soon as possible by filling out and submitting an Injury Report. If you are registered with MyAccount, it can be submitted electronically, at [www.my-account.ns.ca](http://www.my-account.ns.ca).
- The physiotherapy clinic will call you for additional information, including the worker's job description, the functional demands of their job, as well as any suitable transitional duties available at your workplace.
- The physiotherapist will send you the completed PT Intake Report – Form A, detailing the worker's injury, diagnosis and estimated date of return to pre-injury work. This report is also sent to the WCB and to the worker's doctor.
- If the worker is unable to return to their regular job right away, the physiotherapist will provide a Physical Abilities Report – Form E. As the employer, you should work with the worker, WCB case worker, physiotherapist and the worker's doctor in identifying meaningful transitional duties. The physiotherapist will update the Physical Abilities Report every two weeks to show the worker's functional progress. This ensures the return-to-work plan continues to include appropriate transitional duties based on the worker's improving abilities.
- Keep in touch with the worker and the WCB case worker during the return-to-work plan. Connection to the workplace can help the worker stay motivated to return.
- Accommodate your worker's scheduled physiotherapy appointments if the worker is unable to book them outside of working hours.
- Investigate what may have caused the injury to prevent recurrence. Prevention tools and information are available at [www.worksafeforlife.ca](http://www.worksafeforlife.ca) or by calling our Prevention Information Officer at 1.800.870.3331.
- Talk to the WCB case worker about any questions or concerns.

# **WORK SAFE. FOR LIFE.**

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## **Interactive prevention and return-to-work information:**

[www.worksafeforlife.ca](http://www.worksafeforlife.ca)