Whether working on a construction site, in a manufacturing site or in a cubicle, employees are constantly overexerting their muscles. The daily wear and tear leaves workers in pain and discomfort and at risk for musculoskeletal disorders while costing businesses the loss of staff resources and revenue. If implemented correctly, a workplace stretch-and-flex program provides numerous benefits that can keep staff members healthy and in good condition to perform their job responsibilities, including increased flexibility, improved employee perception of physical and mental well-being and decreased claim costs.

While there are various advantages to implementing a stretch-and-flex program, it must be done with careful consideration to see a return on the investment. Many employers believe a program is an “easy fix” that will save on claim costs, but a poorly or hastily executed program may result in additional financial loss and even injury.

Considerations for your Stretch and Flex Program
Consider the following when deciding to implement a workplace stretch-and-flex program in your organization:

Choose the frequency of stretch-and-flex breaks.
A secretary and a firefighter use different muscle groups when performing their day-to-day activities. A stretch-and-flex program has the most success when it is tailored to the muscle group involved in completing a task. Traditional stretching is best suited to jobs that require large body motions, such as construction work.
This type of stretching should be performed once or twice a day with each pose held for 20 to 30 seconds. Comparatively, jobs that involve small muscle movements, such as data input, benefit more from frequent stretching breaks that can be practiced for 60 seconds per hour throughout the day.

Consult with a professional.
Since stretch-and-flex programs should be specific to an employee’s job function, it is strongly encouraged that a professional design the programs to ensure the safety of the workers and to maximize the benefits. A quarterback and a lineman may both play the same physical game, but each should have a different stretch-and-flex program tailored to their function on the field; the same goes for your industrial athletes.

Ensure instructors are trained properly.
Just as it is important to consult a professional when implementing a program, it is also imperative the program is properly carried out by well-trained instructors. Trained instructors help mitigate injury, maximize benefits and encourage consistent participation.

Include union representatives in the discussion.
If stretch-and-flex programs are not mandatory for employees, the ergonomic benefits of the program will be difficult to determine. If some employees decide not to participate for personal reasons, a compulsory program could lead to issues with union representatives. Be sure to include these representatives in the conversation when discussing the implementation of a stretch-and-flex program.

Take a holistic approach.
A workplace stretch-and-flex program is just one piece of a larger ergonomic plan for an organization. While a stretch-and-flex program can be effective, it is also important to follow the “hierarchy of controls.” This includes eliminating, substituting or engineering out hazards wherever possible; being sure effective safety and health policies are in place as well as properly training staff on those policies and equipment by way of administrative controls.
The American work culture has not fully recognized the importance of stretching as a daily routine, but it can be an excellent addition to an overall ergonomic plan, whether your employees sit at a desk or operate heavy machinery. While there can be many benefits to implementing a stretch-and-flex program, a carefully constructed and executed program that takes these considerations is most likely to succeed.

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