

Medical Certificate - Certification of Workplace Injuries

This information sheet assists medical practitioners in their certification practices so that early, safe and durable return to work may be achieved for injured workers.

Medical certificates for workers compensation

To make a claim for compensation an injured worker must obtain a Workers Compensation Medical Certificate from an accredited medical practitioner as well as complete a Worker's Claim for Compensation form.

The medical certificate is the first step of the return to work process. How an injured worker is certified will determine if they will stay at work after an injury at normal capacity or reduced capacity, or if they will be off work. For more advice on how to complete workers compensation certificates, WorkCover has prepared the publication 'How to complete workers compensation medical certificates correctly', available on the WorkCover website at www.workcover.tas.gov.

Certification Practices

Early return to work and the medical certificate

Research overwhelmingly shows that time off work, particularly if it is unnecessary and/or prolonged, can lead to adverse physical, psychological, social and financial effects, which worsen with each passing day.

Health outcomes are much improved if injured workers can remain at work during recovery or return to work as soon as possible if time off work is required.

As the beneficial effects of work outweigh the risks of being off work, an early, safe and durable return to work should be encouraged which can be facilitated with two key components:

- ▀ first, the injured worker is medically assessed to determine work capacity with appropriate restrictions documented on the Workers Compensation Medical Certificate
- ▀ second, the identification of suitable duties that match the medical restrictions and which will determine whether the injured worker returns to work safely and durably.

Is time off work medically necessary?

For a majority of work-related injuries, time off work is not medically necessary.

Medically necessary time off work means an injured worker is totally incapacitated and requires hospitalisation or strict bed rest. It may also mean that work, or travelling to work, is medically contraindicated.

Severe injuries do occur and some injuries result in reduced functional capacity but, in reality, it is uncommon that an injured worker has absolutely no functional capacity.

It is important to avoid medically certifying time off work, when the reasons for time off are not medical. The following reasons are not 'medical':

- ▀ there are no suitable duties
- ▀ suitable duties are not very productive
- ▀ there is possibly no transport available
- ▀ it's too much hassle to co-ordinate early return to work.

These are issues that need to be addressed by the employer. A worker may be given time off work by an employer who is unable or unwilling to address these issues, but from a medical standpoint, the worker is medically fit to work. Hence, the medical certificate should reflect this.

Similarly, psychosocial factors that do not directly relate to the injury, such as job dissatisfaction or anger, are not necessarily 'medical'. Keeping someone away from work for these reasons may mean psychosocial factors are not addressed appropriately and can result in longer term disability.

To determine if an injured worker has work capacity, ask yourself "what would the person be doing at home?" If they are able to walk around safely, can sit, can make breakfast or coffee, then most likely they can do some form of work if it is available.

Certifying work capacity

To determine work capacity after an injury, consider:

- ▮ functional capacity – what the injured worker can do
- ▮ functional limitation – what the injured worker cannot do
- ▮ medically based restrictions – what the injured worker should not do.

Using a knee injury as an example, here is how work capacity could be determined:

- ▮ the injured worker is able to sit, use their hands and can stand / walk for short periods. This is what they can do
- ▮ the injured worker is unable to squat, kneel or stand / walk for prolonged periods. This is what they can't do
- ▮ the injured worker shouldn't walk on uneven terrain or twist.

When documenting appropriate restrictions for musculoskeletal injuries, consider:

- ▮ forces – including lifting, pushing, pulling
- ▮ positions – including sitting, standing, stooping
- ▮ movements – including reaching, bending, twisting
- ▮ time – including time at work or rest breaks.

Section 7 of the Workers Compensation Medical Certificate has a simple table that prompts you to document some of the more common restrictions when certifying work capacity.

Certify restrictions, not specific work duties

Remember to provide restrictions such as 'no lifting greater than 5kg' or 'no repetitive bending' rather than specific work duties such as 'office work only' or 'able to work in checkout'. This allows the employer greater flexibility in finding suitable duties over a range of available job tasks, which benefits the injured worker.

Progress

Medical certificates should demonstrate progress. As the worker improves or stabilises, restrictions should be reduced. The injured worker, employer and insurer will have a sense that recovery is occurring. Lack of progress can lead to psychosocial consequences and unnecessary investigations and examinations.

What if the injured worker is worsening at work?

To prevent unnecessary disability, it is important that return to work is not just early, but also safe and durable. If an injured worker returns to work and reports increased symptoms, or is not coping with the provided duties, review:

- work capacity to ensure certified restrictions are appropriate for the condition and recovery stage. Consider factors related to forces, positions, movements and time
- duties to ensure they are suitable and match the certified restrictions. Contact the employer to discuss restrictions and / or duties or encourage them to refer to a Workplace Rehabilitation Provider to assist with identification of appropriate duties (including a risk assessment before the commencement of duties).

Communication

A medical certificate is a communication tool. To be effective, it is important you complete it thoroughly, clearly and legibly. If an employer or injured worker cannot read what you have written, restrictions may not be adhered to and recovery may be delayed or prevented. Electronic versions of the Workers Compensation Medical Certificate will be made available, which will help minimise this issue.

Communication between all parties can greatly assist recovery and return to work after injury. Feel confident to communicate by phone, meet for a case conference or visit the work site to obtain knowledge of the work performed, clarify restrictions and review suitable duties. Employers and injured workers value and appreciate your input and are likely to be pleased to hear from you.

This information is for guidance only and is not to be taken as an expression of the law. It should be read in conjunction with the Workers Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988 and any other relevant legislation.



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