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Back Pain, Disability, and Lost Productivity Costs, Oh My!

BY DR. SCOTT E. ROSENTHAL

IT IS MONDAY MORNING. Your team's project deadline is fast approaching. It'll be an all-hands-on deck work week. Then comes the dreaded call from an employee suffering with severe back pain. Their unexpected absence will mean even longer hours for everyone else, or a missed deadline and lost business revenue.

Besides the staggeringly high costs of lost productivity, back pain can drive up your company's health and workers' compensation insurance premiums (or benefit costs for self-funded entities). In the United States, two thirds of the \$100 billion per year spent on back pain is for the indirect costs of lost wages and productivity. The other third is for direct costs—mostly attributed to surgery, imaging, prescriptions, injections, evaluations, and emergency room visits.



Recent medical studies highlight the significant role chiropractic plays in tackling back pain and provides new hope for business owners and managers desperate for a solution. Chiropractic has been shown to get injured employees back to work quicker, reduce episode costs, and prevent pricey surgeries.

A 2016 study, published in the *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation*, examined the duration of financial compensation of employees with occupational back pain who first sought three types of health care providers: a medical physician, chiropractor, and physical therapist. It was concluded that “the type of health care provider first visited for back pain is a determinant of the duration of financial compensation during the first five months. Chiropractic patients experience the shortest duration of compensation.”

A North Carolina study in 2016 analyzed statewide claims data among state employees suffering from headaches, neck pain, and low back pain and

compared the following treatment paths: medical/osteopathic, chiropractic, and physical therapy. The risk-adjusted analysis for claims between 2006 and 2009 found that, when compared, chiropractic care costs:

- 79 percent less for low back pain
- 79 percent less for headaches
- 84 percent less for neck pain

Analyzing nearly 2,000 Washington state employees over a three-year period, researchers found that surgical rates are greatly dictated by which type of doctor employees visit first for care. Forty-three percent of workers who first saw a surgeon had surgery. Only 1.5 percent of workers with the same condition who saw a chiropractor first ended up receiving surgery. Considering that chiropractic treatment costs a tiny fraction of what surgery costs, the 29-fold difference is hard to ignore.

Back pain can cripple business productivity and cut deeply into profits. Your company's bottom line can greatly improve with adequate employee access to chiropractic care. Chiropractic will not only help prevent surgeries and lost time but it can also reduce those stressful Monday morning calls! ■

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