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Tests and treatments your employees may not need

Consider these guidelines when sending workers or job candidates to the doctor

Some employers have doctors do medical exams to help keep workers healthy and productive. Or, a new employee may be sent to the doctor before starting the job.

The doctor may order tests and treatments. But some tests are not needed. And some treatments may actually be risky for employees. Plus, sometimes this care can be expensive or cause employees to miss work.

Learn more about these tests and treatments below, from experts at the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (ACOEM).

X-rays rarely show if an employee can do the job. Often X-rays simply show common problems, such as normal age-related changes.

X-ray results may lead doctors to order more tests or specialist care. But simpler, less costly treatments may be best. They may help relieve pain, prevent injury, and keep a person functioning:

- Learning safer ways to lift things
- Doing physical therapy
- Taking over-the-counter medicines

X-rays also expose people to radiation. A single X-ray is not dangerous, but the risk of developing cancer goes up with more tests.

Usually, X-rays aren't needed for low back pain. A doctor who checks a job candidate for low back problems should get a detailed patient history and a description of the physical work needed for the job. This will help show if a person can handle the job tasks.

X-rays should only be ordered if the patient has a clear need. For example, a patient has a:

- Fever.
- History of injury.
- Significant loss of ability.
- Bone condition.

X-rays don't help to diagnose plantar fasciitis. Plantar fasciitis is one of the most common reasons for adult foot pain. It is caused by injured tissue along the bottom of the foot. It can be especially painful for employees who stand or walk at work.

But plantar fasciitis can be diagnosed without an X-ray. To relieve pain, doctors should recommend:

- Certain stretching exercises.
- Losing weight.
- Learning how to slowly bear weight after sitting, or in the morning.
- Avoiding running.

Don't ask doctors to order sleep studies for employees with ongoing fatigue or insomnia. A sleep study, called a polysomnogram, isn't usually needed to diagnose insomnia. Instead, doctors should look for causes of poor sleep, such as anxiety, stress, or depression. And they should suggest better sleep habits.

A sleep study might be needed if the employee suffers from daytime sleepiness and could have sleep apnea.

- Symptoms of sleep apnea include loud snoring, headache, and waking with a sore throat.
- Risk factors include aging, obesity, male gender, diabetes, or a large neck diameter.

Ask doctors not to prescribe opioid pain relievers to employees in safety-sensitive jobs. Opioids can be dangerous, especially for employees who operate motor vehicles, forklifts, cranes, or other heavy equipment. The drugs cause nearly 17,000 deaths in the U.S. every year.

Doctors too often prescribe opioid pain relievers for chronic pain. And opioids are usually not the best way to treat acute pain. Doctors should recommend over-the-counter pain medicine, exercises, ice, heat, or physical therapy. If employees must take opioids for a short time, be sure that they don't use heavy machinery or drive a vehicle.

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Advice from Consumer Reports

Managing back pain at home and at work

What's good for you at work is good for you at home. The tips in this report are just as helpful when you are seeing your personal doctor. Tell your doctor if you have trouble doing any tasks at work or home because of pain or an injury.

Back pain is very common. In fact, about eight out of ten Americans have had back pain. Try these simple ways to prevent or ease back pain:

- **For lifting objects small enough to put between the knees**, get close to the object. Bend at the knees, and lift with your legs. Hold the object close to your body with your knees slightly bent.
- **For larger items**, lift with two people or use equipment, if possible. Otherwise, bend over and lift with your back.
- **If you sleep on your back**, try putting a pillow under your knees.
- **If you sleep on your side**, draw your legs up slightly and put a pillow between your legs.
- **Return to low-impact activity**, such as walking, as soon as possible. Do strength-training exercises that target your stomach and back muscles.

If your back pain is severe or related to an injury, your doctor may recommend opioid painkillers. Don't use opioids for more than a few weeks. Ask for a different treatment, such as an over-the-counter pain medicine or physical therapy. And be sure not to drive or use heavy machinery while taking opioids.