

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

A Worker's Guide

Direct Access to Early Assessment of
Sprains and Strains at Work



Nova Scotians – safe and secure from workplace injury

W

HEN YOU'VE BEEN INJURED, staying connected to your workplace and continuing to work, when possible, is an important part of your recovery.

Direct Access to a Workers' Compensation Board (WCB) approved Health Care Provider, such as a physiotherapist or chiropractor, gives you more timely access to the health care services you need. Assessing what duties you can safely do allows the return-to-work process for sprain and strain injuries to begin right away. With modifications to your work or transitional duties, you can often return to work the same day. This is good for you and your family, and your employer. It also means a healthier workforce for Nova Scotia.

A Guide to Early Assessment of Sprains and Strains at Work explains Direct Access to WCB Approved Health Care Providers, your role in it and the involvement of your employer, health care service provider, doctor and WCB case worker.

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What is Direct Access to Early Assessment of Sprains and Strains at Work?

If you experience a sprain or strain injury at work, Direct Access to a WCB Approved Health Care Service Provider, such as a physiotherapist or chiropractor, gives you more timely access to health care services. You can go directly to one of these approved health care providers for an assessment.

You can choose to see your family doctor, but your assessment with the health care service provider should not be delayed because you are waiting for an appointment with your doctor. The priority is early assessment – to assess your injury and your capacity for returning to work in a safe and timely manner. Your health care service provider will share the results of your assessment with your family doctor.

Once the injury has been assessed, the health care service provider will determine if treatment is necessary.

The WCB has a list of approved health care service providers who are well-informed on the workers' compensation system, including return to work and the claims process. You may be referred to one, or you can choose from our list, available on our website, at www.wcb.ns.ca/directaccess, or by calling 1.800.870.3331.

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 physiotherapy provider 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 treatment 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.

Who are WCB Approved Health Care Providers?

WCB approved health care service providers, such as physiotherapists and chiropractors, 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 you to go back to your regular work or to transitional duties.

Their knowledge also ensures that any problems identified beyond the scope of their training are directed to your 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 chiropractor 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 with a chiropractor. During the assessment, Donna's chiropractor notes that she has a normal examination, with a full range of motion – none of the assessment exercises change the pain in anyway. The chiropractor determines this is not a sprain or strain and sends Donna to her doctor, who diagnoses her with kidney stones. Donna's WCB claim is closed as this is not a work-related injury.

How it Works

Your employer or WCB case worker will send you to an approved health care service provider for an assessment. You can expect this assessment to occur within three days of your injury. Ideally, it will happen on the same day.

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

Your health care service provider will not ask you to do anything unsafe. The focus of this evaluation is to assess the injury and determine your capacity for returning to work, either to your regular job or to transitional duties.



Your health care service provider will tell you about your injury, diagnosis and, if required, a treatment plan. They will also help you understand what to expect during treatment.

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

If you are unable to return to your regular job right away, your health care service provider, working together with you, your employer, your doctor and the WCB case worker, will determine your return-to-work plan, including treatment and what transitional duties, if any, can be provided.

If your health care service provider suspects the injury is more serious than a sprain or strain, you will be sent to your 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 is a physical abilities assessment? Will it hurt?

A physical abilities assessment is a series of activities to find out what job tasks you can safely perform. After completing this assessment, you may feel tired, and you may even experience some pain or discomfort. This is not unusual, and is a typical response to the evaluation. If you experience pain following the assessment that is worse than you expected, let your health care service provider know.

What is my doctor's role within Direct Access to Assessment?

That's up to you. You may choose to see your family doctor. But, your physical abilities assessment should not be delayed because you are waiting for an appointment. Your doctor plays an important role and support in your long-term health care, so do keep him/her informed of your condition and any prescribed treatment. Your health care service provider will also send your assessment and any progress updates to your doctor.

What if my family physician and health care service provider disagree with the diagnosis or treatment plan?

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

What if my employer tells me I have to go see a health care service provider of their choosing?

Your employer may establish a working relationship with a WCB approved health care service provider and encourage you to go there. This health care service provider will be familiar with your return-to-work program and workplace. You do, however, have the right to attend an approved clinic of your choosing.

Why do I have to see a health care service provider approved by the WCB?

The health care service providers 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 your injury within three days.

How do I know if a health care service provider is approved by the WCB?

The list of approved health care service providers is available on our website, at www.wcb.ns.ca/directaccess, or by calling 1.800.870.3331.

Who determines my return-to-work plan?

Your health care service provider, employer and WCB case worker will work together with you to determine your return-to-work plan. Your family doctor may also provide input.

What if I don't agree with the recommended return-to-work plan because of safety issues at my place of work?

Speak to your WCB case worker immediately.

What are transitional duties?

Transitional duties are duties you can safely perform as you recover. They are as close to your regular work as possible. They may include the modification of some of your regular work duties, the elimination of some duties, some new duties, or a combination of your regular work and any of these transitional duties.

Worker's Need-to-Know Checklist

- Notify employer of your injury right away.
- Ask your employer to fill out the first two sections of the WCB form (Intake Report – Form A) and send it to the health care service provider, or take it with you to the clinic. Your employer will also report the injury to the WCB.
- Have an assessment by an approved health care service provider. The health care service provider will talk to you about what you can expect during the assessment. They will also ask you to complete a consent form, to share reports with your employer. Ask any questions you want to during the assessment.
- The health care service provider will call your employer for any additional information required, including your job description, the functional demands of your work, as well as any transitional duties available at your workplace.
- If required, participate in a WCB approved health care provider's treatment plan.
- See your doctor if your condition changes significantly, or at the recommendation of your health care service provider or WCB case worker.
- Keep in touch with your employer and WCB case worker during your return-to-work plan.
- Talk to your WCB case worker about any questions or concerns.

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Interactive prevention and return-to-work information:

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