



Older Workers' Injuries Entail Lengthy Absences From Work

The 10 million Americans aged 55 years and over who work for wages and salaries in the private sector are a third less likely than are younger workers to be hurt seriously enough to lose worktime. But when they are seriously injured, older workers typically require 2 weeks to recover before returning to work, twice the recuperation time younger workers need.

The duration of absence from work due to a work injury doubles from a median of 4 or 5 days for injuries to workers under age 35 to a 10-day median for those involving workers 55 years and older (see chart).¹ At least two factors contribute to longer recuperation periods for older workers.

First, they sustain especially disabling conditions, such as broken bones and multiple injuries, more often than younger workers do. Fractures, for example, made up 11 percent of injuries suffered by workers 55 years and older, compared with about 5 percent for workers under age 55. Second, even the same disabling condition required a longer recuperation for older workers. For example, their fractures resulted in a median absence of 30 days compared with 18 days for younger workers.

Examining ways that older workers were disabled on the job also provides clues to their relatively lengthy absences from work. They were most commonly dis-

abled by a fall to the floor or other surface that had supported them prior to the fall. Such falls accounted for 17 percent of the 1993 case total for workers 55 years and over, compared with 8 percent for younger workers. (See table.) Further, older workers take longer to return to work after such falls (a median of 11 days) than do younger workers (6 days). The difference in injury duration partly reflects how often such falls result in fractures: about a fourth of the time for older workers while only in about an eighth of the cases do younger workers sustain fractures from falls. Moreover, older workers took 35 days to recover from a fracture sustained by falling to the floor or other non-elevated surfaces, compared with 25 days for workers under age 55.

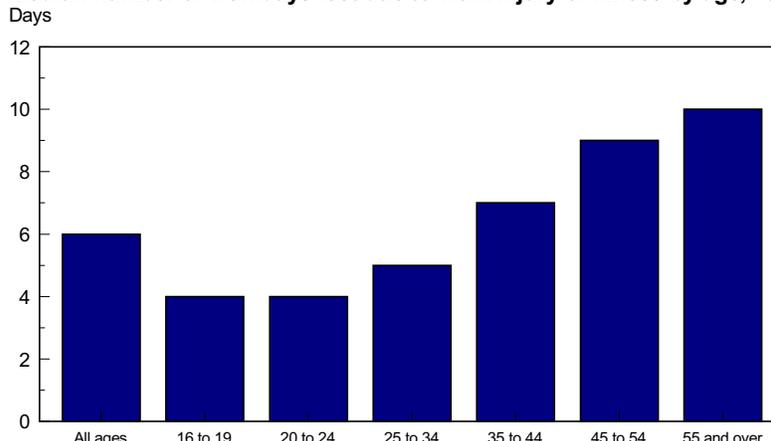
Other major injuries also resulted in longer absences from work for older workers than for younger ones. The accompanying table shows, for example, that workers 55 years and older typically required

10 or 11 days to recuperate from overexertion injuries incurred while maneuvering objects, compared with 6 or 7 days for younger workers. Absences also lasted 2 or 3 days longer for older workers struck by falling, swinging or slipping objects; striking against stationary objects; or bending, climbing, crawling, reaching, or twisting when such movement in itself was the source of injury.

The cost implications of severe injuries to older workers are especially troublesome for the future, given that their labor force growth rate of 3.3 percent a year is expected to be triple the annual rate for the total civilian labor force between 1994 and 2005. By year 2005, BLS estimates 15 percent of the labor force will be 55 years and over, compared with 12 percent in 1994. Thus, older workers' share of all serious injuries, currently at 8 percent, is likely to increase by 2005, even though their risk of injury is relatively low.

¹ Median days away from work—the key measure of injury duration used here—designates the point at which half the total cases for the category studied involved more days and half involved fewer days. In this summary, the term “injury” also covers a relatively small number (117,000) of “illnesses,” reported among workers of all ages sustaining some 2 million cases with days away from work in 1993.

Median number of workdays lost due to work injury or illness by age, 1993



SOURCE: BLS, Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses—cases involving days away from work

Common disabling events resulting in lost worktime by age group, 1993

Disabling event ¹	Percent distribution		Median days lost	
	Workers, 55 years and over ²	Workers, under 55 years ²	Workers, 55 years and over	days lost under 55 years
All events	100	100	10 days	5 days
Fall to floor, walkway, ground, or other surface	17	8	11	6
Overexertion while lifting object	13	17	11	6
Struck against stationary object	5	4	5	3
Struck by falling object	4	5	7	4
Bending, climbing, crawling reaching, twisting	4	4	7	5
Overexertion in pulling or pushing object	4	4	10	7
Struck by swinging or slipping object (e.g., knife)	3	4	6	3
Overexertion in holding, carrying, turning, or wielding object	3	3	10	6
All other events	48	51	—	—

¹Based on three-digit categories stipulated in the BLS Event or Exposure classification structure used to code cases with days away from work.

²About 170,000 days-away-from-work cases were reported for workers, 55 years and over and about 2,031,000 cases for workers

under age 55. Excluded from this table were about 52,000 cases for which age of worker was not available.

³The median designates the point at which half the total cases for the age group involved more days and half involved fewer days. Dash indicates that a median was not computed.

Worker safety data

The Bureau's 1993 Survey of Nonfatal Occupational Injuries and Illnesses provided the information in this summary report on cases involving lost worktime, including age group, how the injury occurred, the incidence of fractures, and the duration of injury. A companion program, the

BLS Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries, shows that older workers also face relatively high risks of fatal work injuries. For more information on these programs, contact the Office of Safety, Health and Working Conditions, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2 Massachusetts Ave. NE., Room 3180, Washington DC 20212, (202) 606-6168.

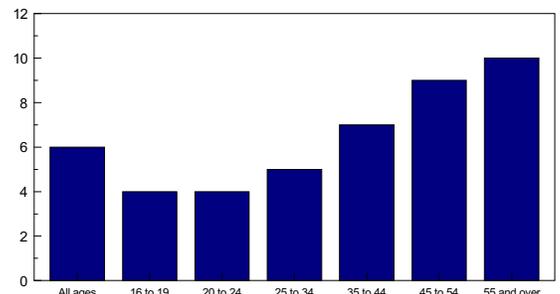
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