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WC Pain Management Alternatives

Opioid crisis has led to interest in alternative pain management

The opioid epidemic in the US has led workers' compensation managers to rethink pain management and assess how the industry responds to injured workers. Most experts will agree that long-term opioid use is not an effective pain management solution and does not substantially improve an injured worker's function over time. In many cases, the pain of an injury drives medical treatment, increases disability duration and extends time away from work. Ultimately, the injured worker continues to suffer and often does not attain the optimal quality of life and level of productivity desired. Today, workers' compensation managers, claim professionals, medical experts, and pain specialists are beginning to collaborate and put forth alternatives to pain management using a multi-disciplinary approach with an emphasis on putting the injured worker's interests and well-being at the forefront. Given today's demands, workers' compensation managers should understand issues such as how to get in front of pain; ways to improve patient understanding of pain components; the importance of employee engagement; and alternative pain management treatments.

Pain Management Challenges

Pain is a multi-dimensional, complex brain phenomenon. It can be difficult to treat, and individual responses to pain and treatment vary. Further, there are different types of pain ranging from acute to chronic pain.

One of the most common challenges to treating pain is there is no way to accurately measure pain. Not having an accurate way to measure pain can create communication problems. Another challenge is how people perceive pain. The pain they describe can be influenced by a number of factors such as mood, past experiences, and individual differences. Another challenge is the length of time that elapses between the initial injury and when the injured worker seeks professional assistance. After lengthy periods of time, a disability mindset begins to set in. Another challenge complicating pain management practices is the complexity of the workers' compensation system. Settlements may depend on perception of pain reported. Another challenge to pain

management is that workers' compensation carriers and claims payers often view pain specialists as an unnecessary and expensive component within the system. They often have uninformed or unrealistic expectations about the pain management process.

Alternative Pain Management Considerations

In considering pain management alternatives, a multi-discipline, functional restoration approach can be used. These programs combine and coordinate many treatment modalities to treat pain.

Another key to effective treatment is getting the injured worker to a pain specialist early before a disability mindset develops and complications occur. Those who show a desire to go back to work are often most successful.

Technology also offers potential benefits in pain management. For example a pain app can be used to track an injured worker's activity, mood, and sleep. This information can be shared with medical providers. Telemedicine is also expanding into the pain management arena and can offer added convenience by reducing the need for travel.

Employees should be encouraged to make positive choices that include good nutrition, regular exercise and adequate rest as a part of healthy lifestyle. Both physical and mental health and wellness are vitally important.

Should an injured worker face surgery, medical personnel can address pre-pain and foster pre-habilitation. They can set expectations and describe the type of pain a patient is likely to experience following surgery, how long it can be expected to last, and what treatment options are available. Knowing how the body is likely to react and being able to apply self-care measures in certain situations is extremely valuable.

Pain can impact a person's mental state and emotional well-being. It will affect thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and relationships. Cognitive behavioral therapies, pain coping skills, yoga, and meditation can be beneficial. Chiropractic treatments, physical therapy and exercise or acupuncture are also alternatives.

Conclusion

Workers compensation managers can play an active role helping injured workers on the pathway to recovery and addressing pain. By understanding the challenges and offering alternatives, workers' compensation managers can improve overall employee experience and results. While there is still much to be learned about pain management, care and compassion remain vitally important.