



# Managing Low-Back Pain Linked to Higher Productivity

Employees suffering from back pain have more absenteeism and presenteeism

By Stephen Miller, CEBS

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Back pain not only takes a toll on the quality of employees' lives but affects workers' productivity as well. Nearly one in four U.S. employees report experiencing lower-back pain, costing businesses \$51,400 annually per 100 employees in lost productivity and medical treatments, a 2013 report by the nonprofit Integrated Benefits Institute (IBI) found.

Lost work time and underperformance on the job (presenteeism) due to low-back pain costs employers \$34,600 per 100 workers, according to *IBI Chronic Disease Profile: Low Back Pain* ([http://ibiweb.org/uploads/knowledge-bank/content/April\\_2013\\_-\\_Low\\_back\\_pain\\_costs.pdf](http://ibiweb.org/uploads/knowledge-bank/content/April_2013_-_Low_back_pain_costs.pdf)).

Employees with back pain are absent four more days per year than those without this ailment and have the equivalent of 4.4 more days of presenteeism annually. The cost of less work time and presenteeism makes up more than two-thirds of the total cost of low-back pain to employers, according to IBI, a workforce health and productivity research and measurement organization.

The components of the \$34,600 price tag per 100 workers are as follows:

- **Sick days:** \$13,100.
- **Presenteeism:** \$8,300.
- **Short-term disability:** \$7,100.
- **Long-term disability:** \$4,200.
- **Workers' compensation:** \$1,900.

"Employers stand to benefit from understanding the extent of back pain in their workforce and helping employees prevent, treat and manage their pain," IBI President Tom Parry told *SHRM Online*.

People with low-back pain also have an average of nearly five related conditions that complicate care strategies. The conditions that contribute the most to lost productivity are:

- **Depression** (29 percent of cases).
- **Chronic fatigue** (41 percent).
- **Obesity** (8 percent).

### Treating Back Pain

Low-back pain can be triggered by a variety of causes, including strain, injury, congenital conditions and serious medical problems, such as a ruptured disc. Most back pain can be treated nonsurgically with medication and physical therapy. Episodes of pain can be prevented by using proper techniques for sitting, working and exercising.

Good starting points for managing the full costs of low-back conditions include:

- **Occupational therapy.** In a number of studies therapy has been shown to reduce the time spent on temporary disability from work.
- **Positive expectations.** Employees who are optimistic about their recovery from acute back pain have shorter work absences than those with a pessimistic outlook.
- **Counseling.** Back-pain sufferers may also benefit from counseling and mental-health interventions.

Most cases of low-back pain can be resolved in a relatively short time with low-cost workplace-based interventions such as job accommodation.

“Assuming that all interventions offered are high-quality, a cost-effective strategy is to use a stepped approach to treatment beginning with workplace-based interventions, followed by more structured medical and vocational rehabilitation,” said Parry.

*Stephen Miller* (mailto:smiller@shrm.org), *CEBS*, is an online editor/manager for *SHRM*.

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