



Workers' compensation guide to back injuries in Queensland

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Back injuries are one of the most common workplace injuries in Queensland, affecting workers across construction, healthcare, transport, trades and office environments. When a back injury is caused by work, workers' compensation will usually provide support for treatment, time off work and long-term recovery needs.

This guide explains how back injury claims work under Queensland law, what injuries are covered and what workers can expect during the WorkCover process.

A quick overview of workers' compensation in Queensland

Workers' compensation in Queensland is governed by the Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation Act 2003. Under this scheme, most employees are covered by WorkCover Queensland, while some large employers self-insure.

A worker may be eligible for compensation if:

they suffer an injury arising out of, or in the course of, their employment;

work is a significant contributing factor to the injury;

the injury is diagnosed by a medical practitioner.

they submit an application for compensation in the approved form (with an approved medical certificate) within the statutory timeframe (6 months generally, although an extension of this timeframe is possible in some very limited circumstances).

Back injuries often meet this test because they commonly arise from lifting, bending, repetitive tasks, heavy physical work or sudden incidents such as slips or falls. Office workers may also suffer compensable back injuries from poor workstation setup or prolonged static postures.

Types of work-related back injuries

Back injuries in Queensland workers' compensation claims can vary widely. Common examples include:

lumbar or thoracic sprains and strains;

disc bulges, herniations or prolapses;

sciatica caused by nerve compression;

soft tissue injuries from overexertion;

spinal fractures following serious incidents;

aggravations of pre-existing back conditions.

The law recognises both new injuries and the aggravation of previous back issues, provided the worker's employment contributes significantly to the condition.

Common causes of back injuries at work

Back injuries can occur in a wide range of settings. Frequent causes include:

heavy lifting or carrying loads;

repetitive bending or twisting;

operating machinery or equipment;

prolonged sitting without ergonomic support;

falls, slips or sudden movements;

manual handling tasks in healthcare or aged care;

awkward postures in confined or uneven spaces.

Employers have legal responsibilities to reduce risks by providing training, safe systems of work, mechanical aids and appropriate supervision.

Making a back injury workers' compensation claim

The process for lodging a workers' compensation claim involves several steps, including the following:

Reporting the injury to the employer as soon as possible;

Seeing a doctor for assessment and obtaining a WorkCover medical certificate in the approved form (your doctor will know what the approved form is);

Lodging a claim with WorkCover Queensland (or the employer's self-insurer) within the statutory timeframe. That is, 6 months from the date entitlement to compensation arises, which is usually the date of the actual injury but can be another date in some more involved circumstances (for example, an injury which has resulted from exposure to work practices over a period of time);

Providing details of how the injury occurred and any relevant medical history.

WorkCover will assess whether the injury is work-related and whether the worker is eligible for benefits. Early reporting and prompt medical attention will strengthen the claim.

Learn more about lodging a claim in our earlier blog ["How to claim workers' compensation in Queensland"](#)

Workers' compensation benefits payable

Once a back injury claim is accepted, workers may be entitled to benefits such as:

medical expenses, including physiotherapy, medication, imaging and specialist appointments;

- [weekly payments of compensation](#) if the worker cannot perform their usual duties;

return to work programs and vocational rehabilitation;

travel expenses related to treatment;

a potential [lump sum offer for permanent impairment](#), if the worker reaches maximum medical improvement and has an assessed impairment.

Back injuries vary widely in severity, so entitlements depend on the extent of the injury, treatment needs and long-term impact on work capacity.

Permanent impairment for back injuries

If a worker's back injury results in permanent impairment, WorkCover may arrange an independent medical assessment. This is done by a medical practitioner applying the 'Guides for the Evaluation of Permanent Impairment' to determine a percentage impairment (of the whole person).

This percentage assessment determines the extent (amount) of any lump sum to be offered to the injured worker. For back injuries, impairment may arise from:

ongoing pain and stiffness;

reduced range of motion;

nerve involvement or radiculopathy;

structural changes in the spine.

Workers should be aware when accepting a lump sum for whole person impairment, as doing so may result in the injured worker forsaking their right to pursue a separate common law claim, depending on the level of impairment.

Generally, if the permanent impairment assessed is less than 20% (whole person impairment), then the injured worker will need to 'elect' whether to accept the lump sum, or pursue a common law claim for damages (and this election is irrevocable, so get legal

advice when you receive an assessment of permanent impairment!)

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Further reading

- [What's the difference between a Queensland WorkCover statutory claim and a common law claim?](#)

Common law claims for back injuries

A statutory WorkCover claim provides early support regardless of fault. However, some workers may also be eligible to bring a common law claim if their injury occurred because the employer failed to take reasonable care (i.e, the employer was 'negligent').

Examples of employer negligence may include:

not providing proper manual handling training;

poor maintenance of equipment or workspaces;

inadequate staffing levels leading to unsafe lifting;

failing to provide appropriate mechanical aids;

ignoring previous reports of hazards.

A common law claim may provide compensation for future economic loss, pain and suffering and other long-term impacts. Legal advice is always recommended before considering the option of bringing a common law action for damages. Complex legal issues are involved in bringing a common law claim.

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Further reading

- [Common law claims when injured at work in Queensland](#)

Pre-existing back conditions and WorkCover claims

Many workers already have some level of back degeneration or previous injuries. Queensland law allows claims for the aggravation

or acceleration of a pre-existing condition if work significantly contributes to the deterioration.

For example, a worker with mild degenerative disc disease may suffer a substantial flare-up due to repetitive heavy lifting. In such cases, WorkCover may cover the work-related component of the injury.

Return to work after a back injury

WorkCover supports workers to return to work safely and gradually. This may include:

reduced hours or suitable duties;

modified lifting restrictions;

alternative tasks while the worker recovers;

ergonomic assessment of the workstation;

workplace modifications to reduce strain.

A structured return to work plan helps workers recover while minimising the risk of re-injury.

Preventing back injuries in the workplace

Both employers and workers can help reduce the risk of back injuries. Effective prevention strategies include:

using mechanical aids instead of manual lifting;

following safe work procedures;

keeping workstations ergonomically set up;

stretching and strengthening exercises;

reporting hazards early;

avoiding repetitive or awkward postures where possible.

Workplaces with strong safety cultures tend to experience fewer back injuries and faster recoveries.

What if WorkCover rejects my claim?

Workers can seek a review of the decision to reject their application for compensation by applying to the Workers' Compensation Regulator (a separate Qld government body), and if unsuccessful with that review process, can then consider an appeal to the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission.

Legal advice should always be sought to determine prospects of seeking a review or a rejection.

Strict timeframes are involved in seeking a review (3 months from date of receipt of the decision to reject the application for compensation). So, even if you are unsure whether you should review a decision to reject your claim, and the 3 months is quickly approaching, submit the application for review before the 3 months expires. You can always withdraw it later on (at no cost to you). But get legal advice about your review prospects if possible.

Frequently asked questions

Are all back injuries covered by workers' compensation?

Not all back injuries are automatically covered. The injury must be work-related, and work must be a significant contributing factor to the sustaining of the back injury.

Can I claim if the injury built up over time?

Yes. Gradual onset injuries such as repetitive strain or cumulative loading on the spine may be compensable, provided employment significantly contributed to the condition.

Can I choose my own doctor?

Workers can generally choose their treating doctor. Employers cannot force a worker to see a specific practitioner, although WorkCover may arrange independent assessments.

Get help from a workers' compensation lawyer

Back injuries are common across Queensland workplaces and can have a major impact on a worker's health, income and ability to continue working. Workers' compensation provides important support, including treatment, weekly payments and rehabilitation.

Understanding how claims work, the types of injuries covered and the role of permanent impairment assessments can help workers

navigate the system with confidence. Early reporting, accurate medical documentation and clear communication with WorkCover are key to achieving a fair and timely outcome.

This article is of a general nature and should not be relied upon as legal advice. If you require further information, advice or assistance for your specific circumstances, please contact us.