

Q. Why has the Government launched the WorkHealth Initiative?

A. Victorians are becoming unhealthier. This is reducing the state's productive capacity and is adding to the risk of workers being injured at work. It is also putting an unsustainable burden on the state's health system. Improving the health of Victorian workers is a high priority for Government.

Q. How big is this problem of chronic disease?

A. Over one million Victorian workers are at risk of developing a potentially preventable chronic disease which can affect their capacity to work through decreased physical and mental health. There are several factors that increase the risk of a person developing a chronic disease, including poor diet, physical inactivity, smoking, alcohol misuse, excess weight, high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

Q. What impact is chronic disease having?

A. Chronic disease results in workers taking more time off work or going to work when ill (presenteeism). Absenteeism costs the Victorian economy over \$440 million annually. Together cardiovascular disease and diabetes cost Victoria's own health system \$600M per year. The rise in numbers of Victorians with Type 2 diabetes is increasing, which will put further upward pressure on these costs.

Q. What has health and wellbeing got to do with workplace safety?

A. More than half the 29,000 injury claims for 2006/07 involved sprains and strains and other musculoskeletal injuries, costing the Victorian economy more than \$730 million. Being overweight increases the risk of a worker incurring these kinds of injuries, so improving the health of workers is likely to lead to reduced injuries and fewer claims.

Q. What is the solution?

A. Victoria's *Accident Compensation Act* and workplace safety legislation enable the promotion of occupational health, safety and welfare of people at work. This includes the development of education and support programs, and providing incentives to meet the special needs of target groups.

Raising awareness is critical to encouraging workers to adopt a healthier lifestyle, and will cut the risk of them having a workplace injury or developing a chronic disease. Those found most at risk will be provided with the right support so they can better manage and improve their condition.

WorkHealth will offer a variety of programs aimed at improving the health, safety and wellbeing of Victoria's workers, including:

- **On-site health checks and screening** for small and some medium sized employers to access teams of providers which will visit workplaces across Victoria to deliver information, advice and facilitate free on-site screening services for chronic disease.
- **Grants** for larger and some medium employers (annual payroll of more than \$10M) for formal health and wellbeing programs in consultation with their workers. These programs will provide information, advice and facilitate free on-site screening services for chronic disease.
- The creation of a **chronic diseases prevention program** to provide access to services for those workers identified as most at risk.

Q: What will a worker typically experience in the program?

All workers across Victoria will be provided with information on how to improve their health and initially be offered two types of free on-site screening tests facilitated by *WorkHealth* over the next five years:

- a self-assessment Chronic Disease 'Tick Test' which asks the worker a series of questions aimed at identifying physiological and lifestyle issues that contribute to their level of risk of developing a chronic disease; and
- a series of tests carried out on workers by professional health providers to identify a range of health conditions; this could include tests to assess blood sugar level, blood pressure, cholesterol etc.

If the results of either of these tests indicate that the worker is at intermediate or high risk of chronic disease they will be provided with advice about what steps they should take next, like visiting their GP. They will also be able to access a free lifestyle change program under the chronic diseases prevention program to help them adopt healthier eating and physical activity behaviours.

Workers newly diagnosed with chronic diseases, such as Type 2 diabetes will be offered information and education programs under the chronic diseases prevention program to help them manage their condition and improve their lives.

Workers found to be at low risk will be able to access a range of free information and education materials made generally available throughout the life of the initiative.

Q: What about the costs and the grants?

Workers from small and medium size employers will be able to access all elements of the screening and support programs free of charge. *WorkHealth* will be conducting regional and workplace visits beginning from July 2008 and running through until 2013 facilitating access to the free screening tests. Information about visits by *WorkHealth* will be widely publicised prior to their arrival.

Larger employers (with an annual payroll of more than \$10M) can apply for a grant on a dollar for dollar basis with the maximum contribution being \$30 per worker. The \$30 co-contribution will cover the costs of the screening of workers at their worksite. For those large employers who already have wellbeing programs in place, the co-contribution could subsidise the expansion of existing or new initiatives supporting better workplace health and safety and wellbeing at their workplace.

Q. What are the likely benefits of this initiative?

A. Evidence shows that health, safety and wellbeing programs can bring a range of benefits to businesses and their workers by reducing the number of workplace injuries and boosting business productivity through lower absenteeism and presenteeism (where people turn up to work ill).

It is estimated savings will be in the order of \$100 million a year - made up of an estimated saving of \$60M in lower health costs and \$40M in productivity gains at workplaces.

Workplace safety outcomes are expected to improve through reductions in the prevalence of muscle and skeletal injuries, to which obesity and the related chronic diseases are a significant contributing factor.

The program goals of reducing workplace injury and disease by 5%, and reducing absenteeism by 10% mean potential for significant cost savings and improved productivity for employers.

Q. What impact will this have on Worksafe's current activities?

A. None. There will be no reduction in any of WorkSafe's current safety regulation, injury insurance or compensation activities due to the initiative.

Victoria is already the safest place to work in Australia and WorkSafe will continue to work with stakeholders to further improve our safety

performance in workplaces. WorkHealth is an additional initiative that will contribute to improving health and safety outcomes.

Q: Will this mean a change for the role of WorkSafe inspectors?

A: Dealing with workplace hazards and risks remains the most effective way to cut injury numbers. WorkSafe safety inspectors will continue to take their normal approach to encouraging compliance and enforcing the law when it comes to work-related hazards.

The WorkHealth initiative will involve separate teams of people visiting workplaces with a focus on health and wellbeing. Tackling lifestyle issues will further reduce the chances of a worker having a muscle or skeletal condition which then lessens the chances of them incurring an injury in the first place.

Q: What about the impact on employer premiums?

A: The initiative is not being funded out of the annual premiums that employers pay to maintain WorkSafe's regulation of safety and workers' compensation. Over time, WorkHealth aims to reduce the number of musculo-skeletal injuries which drive premium costs for thousands of employers.

Q: What about the impact on benefits for injured workers?

A: There will be no impact. Victorian workers already have access to some of the most generous benefits when they are injured at work. These are funded out of the premiums paid by employers and will not be affected by WorkHealth.

Q. Will workers with chronic diseases like diabetes now be able to claim compensation under WorkCover?

A. No. Workers can only make a claim for developing an illness if it is work-related and they are eligible under the *Accident Compensation Act* 1985. These claims must be supported by appropriate medical evidence.

Q. What guarantees are there that privacy of personal information collected will be protected?

A. Victoria already has strong laws protecting the privacy of individuals, especially when dealing with medical matters. These laws will apply to anyone participating in the program, and there are heavy sanctions for breaches of privacy. Over the coming months the Government will be working to ensure that these protections apply to any worker and employer participating in the program.

Q. Will workers with health issues be protected against discrimination at work?

A. It is unlawful for employers to discriminate against workers on health grounds. Under the grants process, employers must have policies in place to protect against discrimination.