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## WORK CONDITIONING

Work Conditioning also referred to as an Advanced Work Rehab Program is an **individualized, work oriented, physical conditioning program** designed to address impairments of strength, endurance, flexibility, motor control, and cardiopulmonary function contributing to a **loss of functional work tolerances**.

Work Conditioning is only appropriate after a patient has reached a point of **medical stability** related to their injury or illness. A Work Conditioning program generally comes after acute medical care including completion of any physical therapy.

The design of an individualized Work Conditioning program requires the medical provider to perform a **physical examination and functional testing to establish the patient's baseline level of function and to identify any red flags or safety concerns**.

Factors that a qualified medical provider should consider in the design of the Work Conditioning Program include the patient's medical diagnosis, severity of physical limitations, and the physical demands of the target job. After the initial evaluation, realistic goals can be established with regard to return to work prognosis.

Work Conditioning is typically provided in multi-hour session up to 4 hours per day, 5 days per week, and up to 8 weeks.

The **American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) Guidelines for Programs in Industrial Rehabilitation** outlines the basic criteria for an individual to be eligible for a work conditioning program:

1. Have a job goal.
2. Have a stated or demonstrated willingness to participate.
3. Have identified systemic neuromusculoskeletal physical and functional deficits that interfere with work.
4. Are at a point of resolution of the initial or principal injury at which participation in the work conditioning program would not be prohibited.

Patients who initially qualify for work conditioning, but who demonstrate pain limiting behaviors and/or non-compliance with the work conditioning program should be discharged within two weeks of the start of the program.

The APTA Guidelines further stipulate that Work Conditioning “**should not begin after 365 days have elapsed following the injury without a comprehensive interdisciplinary assessment.**”

A 1994 study published in the Physical Therapy Journal of the American Physical Therapy Association found **evidence that patients who participated in a Work Conditioning program were more likely to return to work and return to work earlier as compared to patients who did not participate in a Work Conditioning program.**

Based on the literature review, **return to work rates for patients who received work conditioning were 22% higher (80%) and the incidence of recurrent low back pain during the one year following completion of work conditioning was 50% lower (21%)** as compared to those patients who did not participate in a work conditioning program.

<http://ptjournal.apta.org/content/74/5/471.full.pdf>

For patients in Louisiana covered under workers’ compensation, the **Louisiana Workers’ Compensation Medical Treatment Guidelines** stipulates the following with regard to work conditioning:

*“These programs are usually initiated once reconditioning has been completed but may be offered at any time throughout the recovery phase. Work conditioning should be initiated when imminent return of a patient to modified or full duty is not an option, but the prognosis for returning the patient to work at completion of the program is at least fair to good:*

- (i). length of visit: one to two hours per day;*
- (ii). frequency: two to five visits per week;*
- (iii). optimum duration: two to four weeks*
- (iv). maximum duration: six weeks. Participation in a program beyond six weeks must be documented with respect to need and the ability to facilitate positive symptomatic or functional gains.”*

[http://www.laworks.net/WorkersComp/OWC\\_MedicalGuidelines.asp](http://www.laworks.net/WorkersComp/OWC_MedicalGuidelines.asp)

In my professional experience with over the last 20+ years practicing as an orthopaedic physical therapist in Louisiana, work conditioning requires a **minimum of four weeks** before any **significant measurable and objective progress will be evident**. It is similar to starting a new exercise program at a gym. Progress takes both **time and effort**. With appropriate time authorized by the insurer for work conditioning **AND** good effort provided by the patient during their time in work conditioning, significant measurable and objective progress will be evident.