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When It Comes to Work, How Old Is Too Old?

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My 92-year-old grandfather cuts hay atop a 5-ton tractor each summer, baling winter feed for more than 800 head of cattle. The rest of the year he herds, corrals, immunizes, and cares for the cattle.

A senior scientist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported to work each day well into his 80s, contributing greatly to our understanding of biomarkers, and helping advance laboratory safety measures. An annual laboratory safety award is now given each year in his honor.

Aging and Work

How old is too old when it comes to work? No simple answer will suffice. Not many of your patients will bale hay in their 90s or create new science well into the ninth decade of life, but some will choose to, or must, work long after they originally planned to retire. Some must stand for long periods on the job. Others must bend, reach, and lift. Some clinicians will see patients well after the "traditional" retirement age has passed. It is a near certainty that healthcare professionals will see many older workers and should do all they can to support and enhance the ability of these individuals to continue to work.

Many workers benefit significantly from continuing to work into old age. Work is "medicine" -- even better than medicine for many. In addition to providing economic security and often wider access to healthcare options, work enhances well-being, promotes social interaction, increases the variety and quality of life, and provides many people with a sense of accomplishment and achievement. Although some older individuals work out of necessity, many report that they continue to work to contribute, or to "make a difference." Almost all jobs help older people sustain and extend their physical activity level and support increased social engagement and larger support networks. Work provides accountability for many; an absence from work may serve as the first sign to warn distant family that something is wrong with a loved one. Emerging evidence also suggests that work may improve brain health, sustain healthy cognition, and protect memory.^[1]

Unfortunately, not everyone is able to continue to work as they age. People with physically demanding jobs, where they must work at or near full physical capacity, are often forced to leave employment or change to related but less taxing work. Some physically arduous jobs can lead to, or serve as a cofactor in, the development of long-term disability. Increasingly, the burden of chronic disease in younger and younger workers will shorten their careers. Obesity, tobacco use, physical inactivity, and poor nutrition give way to early hypertension, diabetes, hyperlipidemia, sleep apnea, and joint decline. Given the importance of work in terms of economic security, life options, and health, early identification of disease precursors and optimal management of chronic disease with an emphasis on sustained functional ability is paramount.

Keeping Aging Workers on the Job

How can you help older workers continue to work if they must or choose to do so?

Remind yourself that chronological age matters little. One 75-year-old can differ markedly from another. When it comes to work, what matters is functional ability, not the number of candles on a birthday cake.

Ask your patients about work at each encounter. Don't assume that all your patients who are eligible for Social Security and Medicare are retired or sedentary. Ask about full-time, part-time, paid, or volunteer work. Discuss with your patients the potential benefits of work and encourage them to continue to work, if appropriate. Ask about the risk for hazardous exposures, unsafe working conditions, and workplace stressors and demands, and whether and how the employer is addressing these issues with their employees. When assessing risk, consider the cognitive demands of the job and whether the work environment is an appropriate fit for each individual patient.

Consider asking these general questions:

- Do you have any concerns about your ability to do your job?
- Are you worried about any workplace exposures or risks on the job?
- How stressful is your work?
- Do you believe your job affects your health in any way? and
- Are there things I can do or that I can suggest to your employer that would make your job easier for you?

Help older workers prevent work-related injury and illness. Older workers are injured less often than their younger colleagues, but when they do get hurt, they heal more slowly and experience greater disability. Advise older workers about balance, stretching, and core-muscle strengthening. Help them manage arthritis and large joint issues as necessary. Print and provide useful arthritis self-management and physical activity **resources** to your older patients. If older workers are injured, aggressively manage the problem, and try to limit the extent of the injury by pursuing rehabilitation quickly. Consider earlier referrals to occupational health and other specialists than you might with younger workers. You might also wish to advocate for older workers. Many large employers have on-site occupational health, ergonomics, industrial hygiene, and other safety specialists who welcome input from primary care clinicians in preventing injury, addressing nagging symptoms before injury occurs, and transitioning injured workers back to the job.

Provide routine and preventive care for the patient with work in mind. For your older workers, pay attention to limitations (such as impaired hearing or vision) or medications (such as sedatives, pain medication, or neuroleptics) that can impair driving, balance and mobility, and cognition. Optimize all preventive screenings, including vision and hearing, and make early referrals for any concerns. Update immunizations for influenza, tetanus, and pneumococcal infection as needed. Keep work schedules and constraints in mind when planning dosing schedules, daily medical maintenance therapies, and appointments.

Optimize the management of your patient's chronic diseases with an eye toward work. Many of your patients in their 60s and 70s may realistically plan on working another decade or more. With the patient, carefully consider the optimal balance between work and health, especially when making decisions about life-altering interventions, such as joint replacements and other therapeutics targeted at maintaining functional capacity.

Benefits of the Aging Workforce for Employers

Employers increasingly see the value that older workers bring to the job. Older workers have greater institutional knowledge and usually more experience. They often possess more productive work habits than their younger counterparts. They report lower levels of stress on the job, and in general, they get along better with their coworkers. Finally, they tend to be more cautious on the job and more likely to follow safety rules and regulations.

Workplaces, often out of necessity, have adapted to older workers. Both the Age Discrimination Employment Act of 1967 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 prohibit workplace discrimination based on age or disability, respectively, and support the retention of qualified workers despite limitations that may come from age or disability. However, some employers are more proactive than others, realizing that a well-designed, employee-centered approach to the physical nature and organization of work benefits all workers regardless of their age. Workplace design, the flexibility of the work schedule, and certain ergonomic interventions increasingly focus on the needs of older employees. Many workplace accommodations are easy to make and are inexpensive. Modern orthotics, appropriate flooring and seating, optimal lighting, and new information technology hardware and software can smooth the way to continued work for older individuals. New emphasis on job sharing, flexible work schedules, and work from home can support added years in the job market for many. For a patient who may benefit from such an accommodation, a simple note from you on your prescription pad can facilitate this request.

Although work may not be beneficial for all older persons, for many it is an important avenue to economic security, enhanced social interaction, and improved quality of life. Primary care clinicians can play a vital role in encouraging work when appropriate and by supporting positive health behaviors and interventions that allow work to continue. We can also take steps to manage chronic conditions to support safe, productive work and advocate for our older workers who need special accommodations.

Web Resources

[National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health \(NIOSH\)](#)

[NIOSH: Worklife](#)

[CDC: Healthy Aging](#)

[Occupational Safety and Health Administration \(OSHA\)](#)

[American Association of Retired Persons \(AARP\)](#)

[National Older Worker Career Center](#)

References

1. Rohwedder S, Willis RJ. Mental retirement. *J Econ Persp*. 2010;24:119-138.

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