

AN EMPLOYER'S GUIDE TO WORK-BASED REHABILITATION

A practical, people-centred framework to help injured workers recover sooner, stay connected, and return to work safely.





WHAT WORK-BASED REHABILITATION MEANS

Work-based rehabilitation is essentially about keeping people connected - to their routine, their team, and their confidence - while they recover.

Instead of hitting pause on work until someone is “fully recovered”, it focuses on what they can safely do today and builds from there.

In our experience supporting workplaces across New Zealand, the simple act of staying connected to work (even for a couple of modified tasks) often makes the biggest difference. It protects morale, reduces isolation, and gives the worker a sense of progress, which is incredibly powerful during recovery.

And with 209,400 total work-related claims in 2024 and 169,009 new claims in 2025 (ACC, 2026), [PT1.1] employers are dealing with more injuries than ever. Having a clear, supportive pathway in place is good practice and becoming essential.

WHY IT MATTERS FOR NZ EMPLOYERS

When someone on your team gets injured, it isn't just their recovery that's affected. It impacts resourcing, deadlines, team dynamics, and pressure on supervisors. Most managers we speak with tell us the same thing:

'We just want to do the right thing, but we're not always sure what that looks like.'

That's where a structured work-based rehabilitation approach helps. It takes the uncertainty out of the process and gives everyone (the injured worker, the employer and the wider team) a clearer path forward.

And because claim rates continue to rise in New Zealand, having a structured approach gives employers more stability and predictability during the recovery process.

In a typical triage model, 50% of cases are assessed as 'self-manage'. That means half of your workers experiencing pain, tightness or early injury symptoms are given advice... and then left on their own. This often leads to longer recovery times, unnecessary time away from work, higher downstream costs and a reactive safety culture where issues escalate instead of being prevented. With Bodycare, every musculoskeletal triage-only case is followed up onsite at no extra cost.



THE OUTCOME

Early warning signs are picked up and managed before they become serious injuries, delivering better outcomes for your workers and your business.

ROLES OF EACH STAKEHOLDER IN WORK-BASED REHABILITATION

A smooth recovery journey is never the responsibility of one person. It works best when employers, workers, and treatment providers each understand their role and stay connected.

Where we often support employers is creating the space and tools for this connection, whether that's through an onsite physio providing real-time guidance, or our early intervention clinicians helping interpret capacity and communicate with all parties.



EMPLOYERS

Employers provide the structure that supports progress. Their role includes offering suitable duties, maintaining communication, coordinating updates, and making adjustments based on clinical advice. When employers are proactive, recovery accelerates.



INJURED WORKERS

Workers contribute by participating in treatment, communicating honestly about their capacity, and engaging with the duties offered. Early, supported participation helps maintain confidence and prevents long-term absence.



TREATMENT PROVIDERS

Providers assess capacity, recommend duties, and guide the clinical side of the process. Their communication with employers helps ensure the worker progresses safely and steadily.

When these three groups work in partnership, return-to-work becomes smoother, faster, and safer for everyone.

STEPS TO SUPPORT SAFE, EARLY RETURN-TO-WORK

Here's a simple, practical pathway many NZ organisations are using right now. We recommend using it to shape your own process.



1. ACT QUICKLY



2. MAINTAIN SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATION



3. OFFER SUITABLE DUTIES FROM THE START



4. COORDINATE UPDATES EFFECTIVELY



5. REVIEW AND ADJUST



STEP



ACT QUICKLY

Early action prevents delays.

Research shows that starting physiotherapy within the first 0–2 days can halve recovery duration (14 days vs 28 days) for musculoskeletal injuries. (jospt, 2025)

WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE:

Don't wait for a follow-up appointment, a formal claim, or a worker to 'see how they feel.'



Engage early, start modified duties immediately where safe, and ensure clinical input happens fast.



Prolonged time away from work increases the risk of deconditioning and fear-avoidance behaviours, which can slow recovery and make returning more difficult.



STEP



MAINTAIN SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATION

Short, regular check-ins go a long way. Many employers tell us these conversations make the biggest difference in their outcomes.

WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE:

Schedule check-ins



Normalise updates



Avoid long gaps where the worker feels isolated





STEP



OFFER SUITABLE DUTIES FROM THE START

This doesn't mean inventing new jobs out of thin air, it simply means having a shortlist of realistic, safe tasks the worker can do with confidence. We help many employers build these duty libraries so they're ready when needed.

WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE:

Have a modified-duties library ready so you don't need to "invent" tasks during an injury event.

Focus on tasks that are:

Safe

Productive

Aligned with capacity



STEP



COORDINATE UPDATES EFFECTIVELY

Clear, timely communication across the employer-worker-provider team prevents misalignment, duplicated effort, or delays.

If this feels overwhelming, you're not alone. Many NZ businesses lean on Bodycare to simplify this piece – especially where there are multiple providers involved.

WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE:

Ensure one person holds responsibility for coordinating updates and documenting progress so nothing falls through the cracks.





STEP



REVIEW AND ADJUST

Recovery isn't linear. What matters is keeping the plan flexible and communicating changes early.

WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE:

Return-to-work plan

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Living document

Update duties as clinical advice changes and adjust workflows so the worker remains safely engaged.

HELPFUL SIGNALS TO WATCH FOR DURING THE RETURN-TO-WORK PROCESS

These signals aren't signs you're doing something wrong, they're just cues that the process might need a little extra attention. Many employers appreciate having these on hand as a quick sense-check during recovery.

Where we often step in is helping managers interpret these signals and decide what to do next, so they don't feel like they're carrying that decision alone.



DELAYS IN TAKING EARLY ACTION

If the first steps after an injury take longer than expected, recovery can start later than it needs to. Acting promptly helps maintain confidence and keeps the worker connected to their role.



LIMITED MODIFIED DUTIES AVAILABLE

When suitable duties aren't clearly identified, workers may end up taking unnecessary time away from work. Having meaningful, safe alternatives ready to offer can make a significant difference in recovery time and engagement.



GAPS IN COMMUNICATION

If updates between employer, worker, and treatment provider become irregular or unclear, the process can lose momentum. Regular check-ins help maintain alignment and reassure the worker they're supported.



INDICATORS THAT A WORKER IS WAITING TO BE 'FULLY RECOVERED' BEFORE RETURNING



Sometimes everyone involved assumes a worker must be at 100% before returning, but evidence shows that safe, early participation often leads to better outcomes. When expectations aren't aligned, return-to-work can stall. An 'unfit for work' certificate often refers to the worker's usual job, not all forms of work. With clear capacity information and clinical clarification, many workers can still perform modified or alternative duties safely.

SIGNS OF WORKER ISOLATION



If a worker appears disconnected from their team or uncertain about their progress, it may signal the need for more frequent contact or reassurance. Staying connected plays a key role in wellbeing and return-to-work success.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS



Factors such as anxiety, low confidence or fear of reinjury often play a role in recovery, so supporting the worker's wellbeing is just as important as supporting their physical capacity

THE SCALE OF INJURIES IN NZ

What the latest ACC data shows about the state of work-related injuries in 2025:



Workplace injuries cost New Zealand **more than \$1.25 billion** in 2025, underscoring the significant financial impact injuries continue to have on employers nationwide.



There were **169,009** new work-related injury claims lodged in 2025, contributing to a total of **270,993** active claims for the year.



Construction, manufacturing, and agriculture, forestry and fishing remain the three highest-risk industries, consistently recording the largest volume of work-related injury claims from 2023 through to 2025.



Auckland recorded close to **50,000** workplace injury claims, making it the highest-claim region by a substantial margin. Canterbury followed as the next highest region with just over **20,000** claims, less than half of Auckland's total.

NEXT STEPS FOR EMPLOYERS WHO WANT TO STRENGTHEN THEIR RETURN-TO-WORK APPROACH

Every workplace has its own culture, rhythms, and pressures, so there's no one-size-fits-all solution. But the good news is that with the right support, return-to-work doesn't have to feel complicated or overwhelming.

If you're refining your approach or building capability for the first time, we're here to help. Our team works every day with employers who want clearer pathways, more confidence, and a smoother experience for their injured workers.

Whether you'd like guidance from an onsite physio, help mapping out a duty library, or support tightening up your early intervention process, we'd be happy to talk through what would work best for your organisation.

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and your business from
Recruitment through to
Retirement.**

<https://www.bodycarenz.co.nz/>

Service & Sales Support:
admin@bodycarenz.co.nz

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