The Hidden Barrier to Return to Work

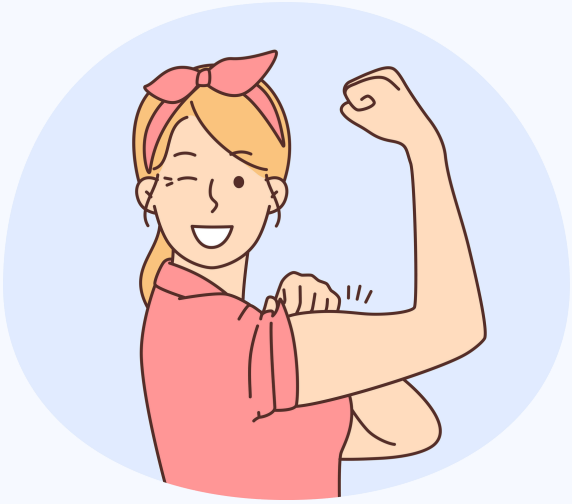
Why deconditioning matters more than we think

Developed by the **IPTC Exercise Physiology Advisory Group.**

A common pattern emerges across workers' compensation: workers injured in one specific area often lose overall capacity to be fit for purpose during recovery, creating unexpected barriers to returning to work.

THE PROBLEM

A worker injures their shoulder. After 3 months of physiotherapy, the shoulder has healed. But when they attempt to return to work, they struggle - not because of the shoulder, but because they've lost cardiovascular capacity, general strength, and functional capacity to be fit for purpose during recovery.



1-3%
Daily muscle strength loss during inactivity

7.5%
Cardiovascular capacity drop in 10-20 days

2x
Time needed to rebuild vs. time to lose capacity

$10-20k
Cost of work hardening programs

70%
RTW success rate after 20 days off

35%
RTW success rate after 70 days off

We wouldn't wait until a shoulder is frozen to begin treatment.
We shouldn't wait until a worker is deconditioned to address their capacity to be fit for purpose.

It Pays to Care
An imperative for change and call to action

itpaystocare.org

The Business Case for Preventing Deconditioning

56%
Reduction in injury costs

46%
Fewer compensation claims

68%
Faster return to work

$2+
Return per $1 invested

CURRENT vs. FIT FOR PURPOSE-FOCUSED PATHWAY

Current Pathway

- Worker sustains injury
- Receives injury-specific treatment only
- Overall capacity to be fit for purpose deconditions during recovery
- Injury heals after 3 months
- Worker loses capacity to be fit for purpose to return to physical work, making RTW harder and less likely

RESULT: Extended time off, expensive work hardening, or failed RTW leading to chronic disability

Fit For Purpose-Focused Pathway

- Worker sustains injury
- Receives injury treatment PLUS capacity to be fit for purpose maintenance advice
- Maintains cardiovascular capacity & strength throughout
- Injury heals after 3 months
- Worker already has required capacity to be fit for purpose level

RESULT: Faster RTW, no additional conditioning required, sustained employment

It Pays to Care

Opportunities for Change

Systems

- Consider removing barriers to maintaining capacity to be fit for purpose during recovery
- Explore streamlined approaches to preventing deconditioning
- Include maintaining capacity to be fit for purpose in standard protocols
- Track deconditioning outcomes

Healthcare

- Consider discussing maintaining capacity to be fit for purpose alongside injury treatment
- Recognise capacity to be fit for purpose ≠ injury treatment
- Provide advice on safe exercise during recovery
- Refer to appropriate practitioners when needed

Insurers & Case Managers

- Consider supporting maintaining capacity to be fit for purpose as prevention
- Track ROI metrics
- Support appropriate exercise programs
- Include capacity to be fit for purpose in RTW planning