

Frequently asked questions for physicians

What is Work Connections?

Work Connections was developed by the University of Michigan to assist and support employees and departments when employees experience an illness or injury, during the subsequent recovery, and through successful return to work. We work with other available programs and services to ensure that employees and supervisors have convenient and centralized access to a wide variety of resources and support. Among other things, the Work Connections team coordinates the services of health care providers and other professionals to promote recovery as well as to ensure appropriate return-to-work support is in place.

How does Work Connections work?

Work Connections acts as a liaison with other programs and services at the University to ensure that you, your patient, and the supervisor have convenient and centralized access to a wide variety of resources. These resources include everything from coordinating the services of nurses, vocational rehabilitation counselors, therapists, and other professionals interested in your patient's recovery to providing return-to-work support such as job analysis and ergonomic consultations.

Is there a cost to use Work Connections?

There is no cost to the employee or his or her department to use the services offered by Work Connections.

What happens during the employee's time off for recovery?

Work Connections staff will assist and support you and your patient in the following ways during the recovery period:

- Contact the employee and you on a regular basis and act as a central clearinghouse for information
- Facilitate communication and updates to your patient's department including projections with respect to your patient's expected absence, accommodation needs and duration of disability
- Respond to your questions or assist with identifying the appropriate resources or content experts to respond to your questions about issues within the workplace
- Explore options for assistance from other University resources

Why does Work Connections request a Health Care Provider Report or medical records?

The employee is responsible for providing sufficient medical documentation to support absence due to disability. Work Connections provides assistance by identifying what medical documentation is needed. As a courtesy, with authorization from the employee, Work Connections will request it from you on your employee's behalf. Failure to provide the necessary medical documentation to justify an absence could have a negative impact on your patient's ability to obtain benefits.

In addition, developing a relationship with the treatment team and obtaining complete medical information is critical to coordinating an effective plan to help your patient.

Under HIPAA regulations, can a doctor or treating facility send medical documentation without written authorization?

- For work-related illness and injuries, medical documentation can be provided pursuant to the Workers' Disability Compensation Act. It's best, however, for the employee to sign the Authorization to Release Patient Information Form since medical conditions may overlap and the absence of complete medical information could result in a delay of services.
- For non-work-related illnesses and injuries, Authorization to Release Patient Information Form is required.

What about confidentiality of health information? Could WorkConnections ever share medical information against the employee's wishes?

Health information belongs to your patient and Work Connections guards it appropriately. This means that medical information is kept secure, private, and out of public view. Medical information cannot be sent to the home department, but updates regarding the employee's status, projected duration of absence, and medical restrictions are provided regularly. Maintaining appropriate confidentiality is a fundamental principle of the program. Health information will be released only in the following circumstances:

- With written authorization from the employee
- When a strict need to know is established (e.g., for health/safety reasons, or to make employment status decisions)
- To comply with the requirements of the Workers' Disability Compensation Act.

What if I do not agree with the plan or actions of Work Connections?

Our primary objective is to provide assistance and support to your patient and facilitate a safe return to work. If there is a disagreement, discuss your concerns with your patient, his or her Case Manager, or the Work Connections supervisor. We will work with you to understand your concerns and find a solution.

What happens when my patient is ready to return to work?

Work Connections' objective is to facilitate a safe and lasting return to work. Our staff will work with you, your patient, and his or her supervisor to:

- Help evaluate essential functions of the job and anticipate needs for accommodations, if required
- Discuss and develop a return-to-work plan
- Maintain regular contact with the employee and supervisor to coordinate the return-to-work plan
- Follow up on medical progress and assist with any problems or concerns after your patient has returned to work

What is a return-to-work plan?

A return-to-work plan is developed—with assistance from Work Connections—by you, and other members of the treatment team, the employee, and his or her supervisor. Among other things, it includes information about any physical restrictions such as lifting or sitting for protracted periods of time, along with the target date on which the employee will be fully recovered and able to assume his or her regular duties.