

# Ergonomics Is The New Wellness

*Four Reasons Ergonomics Leads to  
Better Health Outcomes*



## Introduction:

For years, companies invested heavily in workplace wellness.

Step challenges. Nutrition programs.  
Health screenings. Lifestyle coaching.

The strategy focused on improving employee health with the expectation that healthier employees would produce lower healthcare costs and fewer workplace problems.

However, when safety leaders review injury data, a different story appears.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Employer-Reported Workplace Injuries and Illnesses report, employers recorded 1.8 million cases involving days away from work (DAFW) across 2023 and 2024.

Most of these serious injuries were tied to overexertion and repetitive motion, categories consistently identified in BLS injury classification data as leading causes of workplace injury.

These are not lifestyle problems.

They are exposure problems.

They point directly to the physical demands of work:

Manual material  
handling

Repetitive  
production tasks

Forceful  
tool use

Awkard or  
sustained posture

Vibration  
exposure

These exposures create the injuries that drive the metrics safety leaders manage every day:

TRIR (Total Recordable Incident Rate) tracked through OSHA injury and illness recordkeeping and used to measure overall workplace injury frequency

DART cases (Days Away, Restricted, or Transferred) tracked under OSHA injury and illness recordkeeping requirements and used to identify more serious injuries that remove employees from normal duties

EMR (Experience Modification Rate) which reflects a company's workers' compensation claims history and directly affects insurance premiums

Workers' compensation costs tied to claim frequency, medical treatment, and lost wage payments

Lost production time caused by restricted duty, absenteeism, turnover, and operational disruption

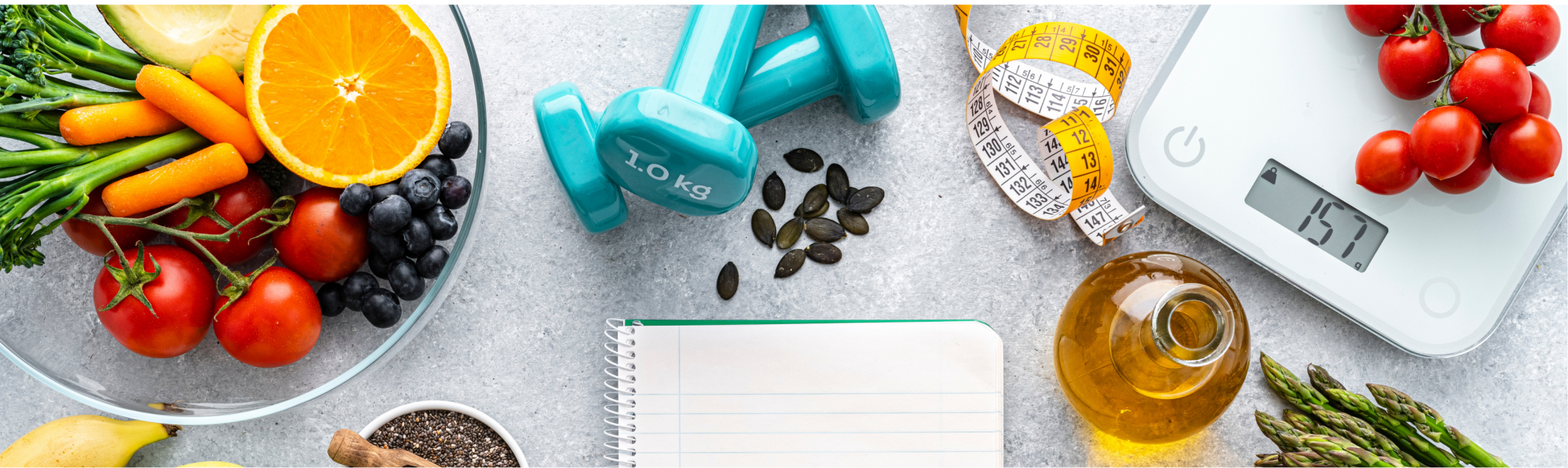
When an employee strains their back lifting materials, develops shoulder pain from repetitive overhead work, or experiences wrist disorders from high-frequency tasks, the root cause sits inside the job.



Hydration reminders will not remove that exposure.



Fitness challenges will not redesign the workstation.



Wellness initiatives can improve awareness and encourage healthier habits. However, they rarely change the physical conditions that produce strain injuries.

When the hazard lives inside the task, the solution must live there too.

That realization is why many organizations are shifting their focus. Instead of relying primarily on behavior-based wellness programs, they are investing in ergonomics.

Ergonomics focuses on the design of work itself. And when the work changes, the results appear in the numbers that matter most to safety and risk leaders.

# REASON #1

## ERGONOMICS DELIVERS STRONGER ROI THAN WELLNESS PROGRAMS

### DIRECT, MEASURABLE RESULTS

Ergonomics produces measurable financial returns because it targets the exposures that drive injury costs.

**When strain injuries drop, several business metrics improve at the same time.**

- Workers' compensation claims will decrease
- Lost time declines
- Productivity improves
- Turnover in physically demanding roles falls

These outcomes are measurable and immediate.

This is why NIOSH recommends evaluating ergonomics programs by combining injury cost savings and productivity gains in its guidance on calculating ergonomics program ROI.

Real-world program evaluations show how this works.

A published economic evaluation, Economic Evaluation of Occupational Safety and Health Programs, reported a 179% return on investment from a back injury prevention initiative, generating more than \$161,000 in net financial benefit through reduced medical claims and sick leave costs.

Other research shows similar patterns.

A review of ergonomics intervention case studies, Estimating the Effectiveness of Ergonomics Interventions Through Case Studies, found that financial benefits were largely positive and that payback periods were often less than one year.

Sector-level evidence supports these findings.

The Institute for Work and Health review of ergonomic intervention cost-effectiveness reports strong economic returns from ergonomic programs in manufacturing and positive outcomes across several other industries.

When injury frequency falls and severity declines, costs follow. That's why ergonomics investments often pay for themselves quickly.



Government case documentation reinforces the same point. One ergonomics intervention described in CDC/NIOSH ergonomics program evaluation examples showed an initial investment of about \$158,000 recovered in under three years, followed by \$55,000 in annual workers' compensation savings.

## WHY WELLNESS PROGRAM ROI IS HARDER TO PROVE

Wellness programs often promise financial savings. However, research evaluating those claims tells a more complicated story.

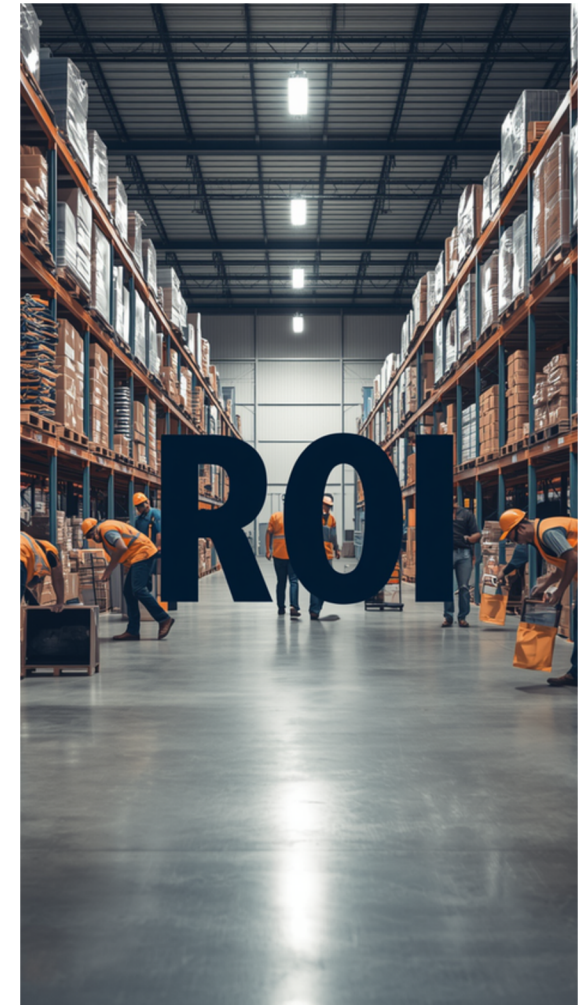
A widely cited Health Affairs meta-analysis of workplace wellness programs reported healthcare savings of more than three dollars for every dollar spent.

That claim helped drive major corporate investment in workplace wellness. However, more rigorous research has produced different results.

A large randomized clinical trial, Effects of a Workplace Wellness Program, found that wellness programs improved some self-reported health behaviors but did not produce significant differences in clinical health measures, healthcare spending, or employment outcomes after 18 months.

A follow-up randomized trial, Workplace Wellness Programs Study, reported similar findings after two years. Researchers again observed no significant effects on measured physical health outcomes or healthcare utilization.

Several structural factors contribute to this gap.



## Many wellness programs:



### **Depend on voluntary participation:**

Employees must choose to enroll and stay engaged. Participation rates often vary widely across departments and job roles, which limits the program's overall reach.



### **Have higher engagement from already healthy employees:**

Workers who are already health-conscious are more likely to participate in wellness initiatives, while employees facing the highest health or injury risks often participate less.



### **Require lifestyle changes that occur outside the workplace:**

Many programs focus on habits such as exercise, diet, or sleep. These behaviors happen outside the work environment, where employers have limited ability to influence or sustain change.



### **Result in declining participation after launch:**

Engagement often peaks during the initial rollout. Over time, participation frequently drops as employees lose interest or competing work priorities take over.

Behavior may improve for some employees. However, the physical exposures in the workplace that drive injury risk remain unchanged.

For safety and risk leaders measured on TRIR, DART rates, EMR, and workers' compensation costs, that distinction matters.

*Ergonomics focuses on the work environment itself. When the environment changes, exposure changes. When exposure changes, injury trends follow.*

## REASON #2

### ERGONOMICS SOLUTIONS ARE DESIGNED FOR THE JOB TAILORED TO HOW WORK ACTUALLY HAPPENS

Most wellness programs follow a broad model. They promote general health behaviors such as exercise, hydration, sleep, and nutrition. Those messages are valuable. However, they do not address the specific risk factors employees face while performing their jobs. Ergonomics takes a different approach. Instead of broad recommendations, ergonomic programs focus on the design of individual tasks. The goal is to reduce exposure to physical risk factors that cause work-related musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs).



MSDs are injuries that affect muscles, tendons, ligaments, nerves, and joints. Common examples include back strains, shoulder injuries, tendonitis, and carpal tunnel syndrome. These injuries often develop over time when workers repeatedly lift, reach, bend, or perform forceful tasks.

The best way to address MSDs is with a structured ergonomic program.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) describes ergonomics programs as structured processes for identifying, evaluating, and controlling risk factors that contribute to these injuries.

### This process typically includes:

- Job task evaluation
- Measurement of physical exposures
- Redesign of workstations or tools
- Worker input and feedback
- Follow-up evaluation

These steps also align with recommendations outlined by OSHA, which emphasizes job-specific hazard identification and targeted controls.

Because solutions are tied to specific tasks, they often produce stronger adoption among employees.

Workers do not need to change their personal habits to benefit. The job itself becomes safer.

### Examples include:



Adjusting lift heights to reduce bending



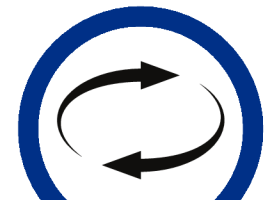
Introducing mechanical assists for heavy materials



Modifying workstation heights to improve posture



Redesigning tools to reduce grip force



Rotating tasks to reduce repetitive strain

When a workstation is redesigned or a process is improved, every employee performing that task benefits. Participation is not required. The safer behavior becomes the default behavior. That is a major difference between ergonomics and wellness programs. Wellness asks employees to change their personal routines. Ergonomics changes the work system.

# WHAT AN ERGONOMICS PROGRAM ACTUALLY LOOKS LIKE

Understanding the value of ergonomics is one thing. Implementing an effective program is another.

Successful ergonomics programs follow a structured, repeatable process that connects injury data to practical improvements in how work is performed. Rather than relying on general recommendations, organizations focus on identifying the tasks creating strain and redesigning them to reduce exposure. Most programs follow a framework similar to this:

IDENTIFY HIGH-RISK TASKS	EVALUATE PHYSICAL EXPOSURES	IMPLEMENT WORKPLACE IMPROVEMENTS
<p>Programs typically begin with data already available inside the organization.</p> <p>Safety teams review sources such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• OSHA injury logs</li> <li>• Workers' compensation claims</li> <li>• Incident reports</li> <li>• Employee feedback or discomfort reports</li> </ul> <p>Patterns often emerge quickly. Certain tasks, departments, or job roles consistently appear in strain injury reports. These tasks become the starting point for ergonomic evaluation.</p>	<p>Once high-risk tasks are identified, the next step is to examine the physical demands of the work.</p> <p>Common factors evaluated include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lifting force</li> <li>• Repetition frequency</li> <li>• Joint posture and reach distance</li> <li>• Vibration from tools or equipment</li> </ul> <p>This evaluation helps determine why the task is creating strain and where adjustments may reduce risk.</p>	<p>After exposures are identified, organizations implement targeted workplace improvements. These changes are often straightforward but highly effective.</p> <p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adjusting workstation heights</li> <li>• Introducing mechanical lifting assists</li> <li>• Repositioning materials to reduce reaching</li> <li>• Redesigning tools to reduce grip force</li> </ul> <p>The goal is to reduce physical strain without slowing the work process. In many cases, improved workstation design also supports better workflow and productivity.</p>

### SUPPORT ADOPTION ON THE FLOOR

Even well-designed improvements require clear communication and supervisor support.

Employees should understand:

- How new equipment or workstation adjustments work
- Why changes were introduced
- How to report early signs of discomfort

When employees participate in the improvement process, adoption tends to increase and solutions are refined more quickly.

### MEASURE PROGRAM RESULTS

The final step is tracking whether changes produce measurable outcomes.

Organizations often monitor:

- TRIR (Total Recordable Incident Rate)
- DART rates (Days Away, Restricted, or Transferred)
- EMR (Experience Modification Rate)
- Restricted duty days
- Workers' compensation claim frequency
- Injury severity trends

When ergonomic improvements reduce exposure, these indicators typically improve over time.

Effective ergonomics programs are not one-time projects. They are ongoing processes that connect injury data, workplace design, and operational performance.

When organizations follow a structured approach, ergonomics becomes part of how work is continuously improved, not just a reaction to injuries.

# REASON #3

## ERGONOMICS CONTROLS RISK AT THE SOURCE

### CONTROL THE ENVIRONMENT, NOT THE EMPLOYEE

Safety improvements last longer when they are built into the environment.

This concept appears in the Hierarchy of Controls, a widely used hazard management model promoted by NIOSH and reinforced by OSHA for managing workplace hazards.

Controls that redesign the work environment sit at the top of the hierarchy because they remove risk from the system itself.

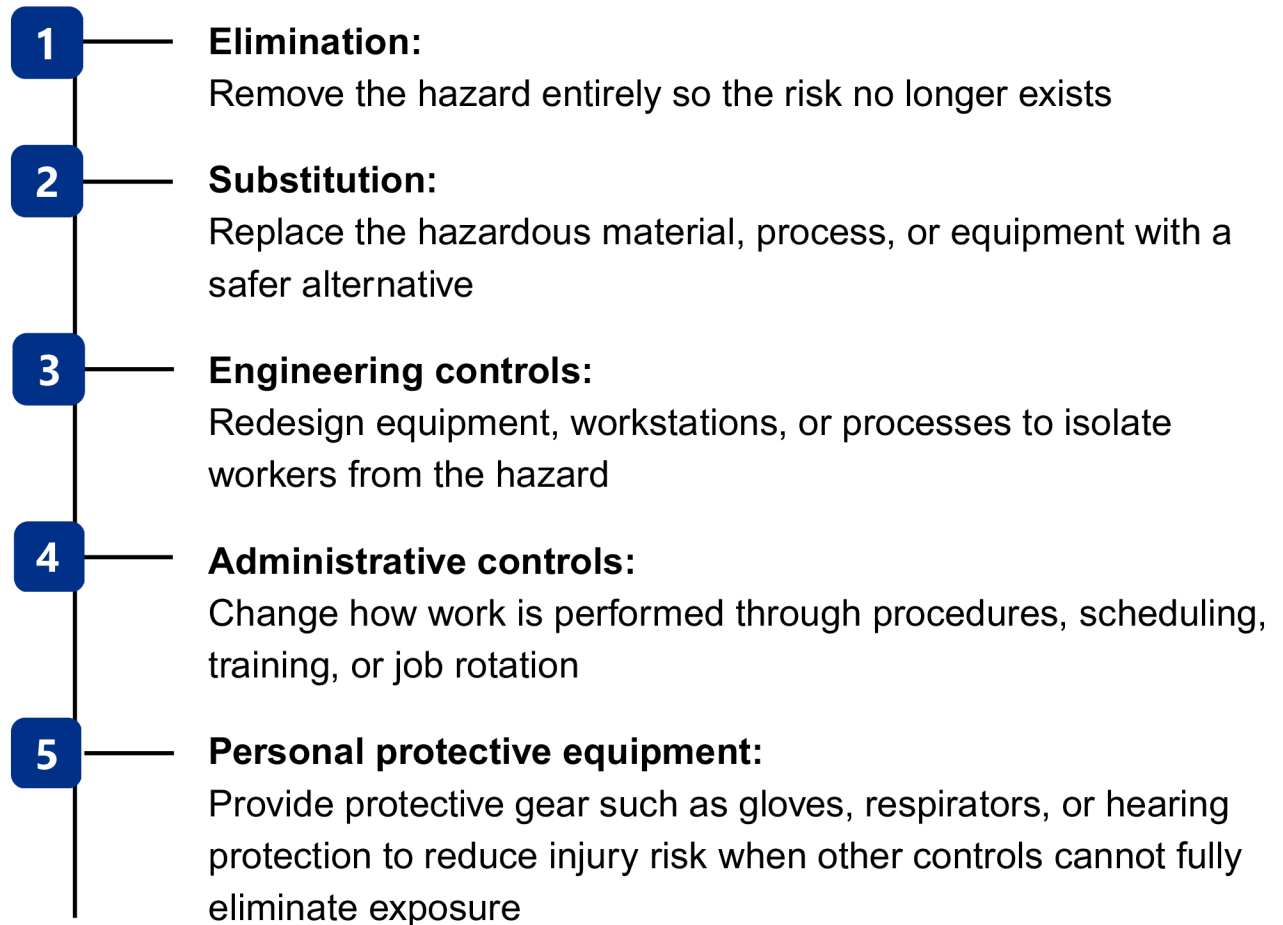
Ergonomics often operates at this level.

Examples include:

- Redesigning lift stations
- Adjusting workstation heights
- Installing mechanical assist equipment
- Modifying process flow

Once implemented, these changes remain in place regardless of who performs the job.

That makes ergonomic improvements durable.



## EMPLOYEES CHANGE. TEAMS ROTATE. TURNOVER HAPPENS.

However, workstation design and process controls remain. New employees benefit immediately from improvements made years earlier. This durability makes ergonomics particularly valuable for organizations with:



Multiple shifts



High workforce turnover



Seasonal labor



Large distributed operations

In contrast, wellness programs depend heavily on individual behavior. Employees must choose to participate. They must maintain engagement over time. They must apply behavior changes outside of work. When participation drops, program impact declines.

### Ergonomics works differently.

The company owns the solution.

The improvement lives in the environment.

That makes results more stable and easier to sustain over time.



# REASON #4

## FULL EMPLOYEE LIFECYCLE IMPACT

### BUILT INTO DAILY OPERATIONS

Wellness programs often operate alongside the business. Ergonomics operates inside it. Because ergonomic solutions are tied to how work is performed, they influence multiple stages of the employment lifecycle.

#### Pre-employment

Ergonomic analysis helps define the physical demands of a job.

Employers can use this information to align candidates with job requirements through physical ability testing or job demand analysis.

This helps prevent early injuries caused by mismatches between worker capability and job demands.

#### Active Employment

During regular operations, ergonomic assessments identify high-risk tasks and opportunities for improvement.

Small changes in workstation design, tool selection, or task rotation can significantly reduce cumulative strain.

## Injury Management



When injuries occur, ergonomic adjustments can support safer return-to-work programs.

Task modification or workstation changes can allow injured employees to resume productive work while reducing the risk of re-injury.

## Retention & Workforce Longevity

Reducing physical strain helps experienced employees remain productive longer.

This protects institutional knowledge and reduces the costs associated with recruiting and training replacements.

Over time, ergonomics contributes to workforce stability and operational consistency.

The OSHA guidance on ergonomics and musculoskeletal disorder prevention describes this approach as an ongoing ergonomic process rather than a one-time intervention. Similarly, NIOSH ergonomics program guidance on evaluation and continuous improvement emphasizes monitoring results and refining controls over time.

When ergonomics becomes part of how work is designed and reviewed, its benefits accumulate year after year.

# RECAP:

## WELLNESS VS ERGONOMICS

TWO APPROACHES. VERY DIFFERENT RESULTS.

Organizations often invest in wellness programs to improve employee health. However, most workplace injuries come from task exposure, not lifestyle habits.

That difference changes which strategy actually moves your safety metrics.

WELLNESS PROGRAMS	ERGONOMICS PROGRAMS
Focus on lifestyle behaviors	Focus on workplace design and task exposure
Addresses habits outside of work	Addresses physical demands inside the job
Participation is voluntary	Protection applies automatically to every worker
Engagement often declines over time	Improvements remain in place long term
Relies on behavior change	Uses engineering and process improvements
Impact varies by participation level	Consistent protection across shifts and locations
ROI debated in research	ROI measurable through injury reduction
Often managed by HR	Integrated with EHS and operations
Benefits may take years to appear	Injury reductions often appear within the first year

## WHERE EXAMINETICS FITS

Many organizations recognize the value of ergonomics but struggle to implement programs consistently across multiple locations. This is where a dedicated occupational health partner can help. Examinetics supports employers with ergonomics services designed for complex work environments.



### Our team provides:

- Ergonomic assessments
- Ergonomic design & controls
- Ergonomic training
- Written program development
- Centralized data reporting across locations

Our ergonomic programs are built on data collection in any environment, identifying the unique demands of your work facilities and job roles, thorough analysis, and employee involvement. We provide a comprehensive assessment of injury risks that are present, how it affects the workers' body, and what specific injuries there are potential to occur. You not only receive recommended controls and solutions, but help implementing the program.

The result is a consistent approach to reducing injuries, maintaining compliance, and protecting productivity.

## SAVE MONEY. REDUCE INJURIES. KEEP WORKERS PRODUCTIVE.

If your organization is investing heavily in wellness initiatives but still struggling with strain injuries, it may be time to shift focus.

Ergonomics addresses the exposures driving your claims.

It aligns with OSHA expectations.

And it produces measurable business results.

Examined ergonomics can help you design and implement an ergonomics program that fits your workforce and your operational risks.



Call 800-493-5377 or request a quote to start building a safer, more productive workplace today.