

# Nurse practitioner's guide to WCB services

Every work-related injury is unique. At WCB-Alberta, our mission is to ensure Alberta's workers receive the right care at the right time—so they can safely return to their lives and livelihoods. We prioritize the worker's experience by tailoring treatment plans to meet their individual needs and circumstances.

As a nurse practitioner (NP), you are a vital partner in this journey. Your role in delivering early, evidence-based care helps drive safe, timely and sustainable return-to-work (RTW) outcomes. All NP services must align with your legislated scope of practice and WCB's standards to ensure quality, consistency and worker-centred care.

## NP service principles

Research shows that most soft-tissue injuries resolve without the need for medical intervention. The most effective rehabilitative approach emphasizes early activation and mobilization, while minimizing fear avoidance behaviours that can hinder recovery. Psychosocial factors—such as fear, anxiety and negative beliefs about recovery—are among the strongest predictors of chronicity in soft tissue injuries. One of the most reliable indicators of a successful RTW is the injured worker's own expectation of recovery.

NPs are encouraged to apply the following principles in care delivery:

- **Early activation:** Encourage movement and activity early in the recovery process to prevent deconditioning.
- **Functional restoration:** Focus on restoring function rather than relying solely on passive treatments.
- **Psychosocial awareness:** Recognize and address psychosocial factors that may contribute to delayed recovery or chronicity.
- **Positive recovery messaging:** Reinforce the worker's belief in the capability to recover, as it strongly influences RTW outcomes.
- **Modified duties:** Promote early RTW through safe, meaningful and medically appropriate modified duties.
- **Evidence-based practice:** Use standardized assessments and clinical guidelines to ensure consistent, high-quality care.

- **Clear documentation:** Maintain timely, accurate and secure records to support collaborative care and informed decision making.

## NP & WCB core responsibilities

- Conduct assessments and follow-ups.
- Referral to specialty services as required.
- Diagnose and manage compensable condition(s).
- Prescribe medications and order diagnostics within scope.
- Collaborate with WCB, employers and other providers.
- Educate workers on recovery, return to work and self-management.

## Objective work capabilities and RTW planning

WCB is committed to providing workers with a positive recovery experience that supports a safe and timely RTW. A key part of this process is identifying and facilitating modified work options that accommodate medical restrictions while keeping the worker active and engaged.

Examples of modified work may include:

- Adjusted or reduced duties.
- Fewer work hours or days.
- Reassignment to a different role or department.
- Permanent placement with the same or new employer, when appropriate.

The information you provide plays a critical role in shaping recovery and RTW plans. Clear, objective reporting helps WCB claim owners collaborate effectively with workers and employers to identify suitable modified work opportunities that support recovery and maintain workplace connection.

## Modified work

- Supports medical restrictions while ensuring the safety of the worker and others.

- Keeps the worker engaged and connected to the workplace.
- Facilitates a safe and gradual transition back to pre-injury employment levels.
- Must contribute meaningfully to the employer's operations.

**Addressing barriers to modified work:** When a worker is hesitant to accept modified duties, it's important to provide evidence-based education on the risks of prolonged absence from work and the benefits of early re-engagement. Reinforcing the value of routine, activity and workplace connection can help shift perceptions and support recovery.

## Psychological injuries

Psychological barriers can significantly impact a worker's ability to recover and successfully return to work. For WCB counselling referrals, the primary focus is to address and treat the psychological effects directly related to the occupational injury or incident. A DSM-5 diagnosis is required for WCB to accept a psychological injury claim. NPs may encounter psychological barriers that impact recovery.

Types of psychological injuries:

- **Traumatic onset:** Sudden, shocking events (e.g., assault, serious injury). Please read our [fact sheet](#) to learn more about traumatic psychological injuries.
- **Chronic onset:** Prolonged exposure to excessive stressors beyond normal workplace pressures. Please read our [fact sheet](#) to learn more about chronic onset psychological injuries.

## When is counselling appropriate?

- Counselling may be provided for workers with an accepted compensable psychological injury claim, or while the claim is under investigation.
- It may also be appropriate when there are signs of a potential work-related psychological injury—such as emotional responses to a physical injury, trauma or chronic condition.

## When is counselling not approved?

Counselling will not be authorized in the following situations:

- Challenges stemming from personal life circumstances (e.g.,

- (e.g., divorce, bereavement, financial stress).
- Pre-existing psychological conditions that have not been worsened by the workplace injury and require ongoing management (e.g., personality disorders).
- Workplace issues unrelated to the injury itself (e.g., interpersonal conflict, job dissatisfaction).

Find more information regarding psychological injuries on our [website](#).

## Expedited surgical services

WCB partners with the Visiting Specialist Clinic (VSC) to provide injured workers with fast access to surgical and specialist consultations. This network includes orthopedic, plastic and general surgeons, and is designed to support timely treatment and recovery.

The VSC also offers non-surgical consultations to assist with diagnosis and treatment planning. These services help ensure workers receive the right care at the right time, contributing to a safe and successful RTW.

## VSC overview

WCB's VSC network provides timely access to best-practice medical and disability management services, supporting safe and sustainable recovery for injured workers. Clinics are in Edmonton and Calgary, with assessments typically completed within 14 days of referral.

In most cases, the specialist who conducts the assessment also performs the required treatment or procedure.

Available specialties:

- Orthopedic: Foot/ankle, knee, hip, spine, shoulder, elbow, hand/wrist
- Plastics: Hand/wrist, carpal tunnel syndrome
- General surgery and hernia

Types of referrals:

- **Surgical consult (SC):** For surgical cases or when surgery is being considered. Can be initiated at any point during the claim.
- **Non-surgical consult (NSC):** For diagnostic clarification or treatment recommendations. Includes joint injections and other non-operative evaluations.

## Referring a patient for an expedited consultation

To request expedited surgical services, select the appropriate option in the **"Treatment Plan Details"** section of your electronic report.

Alternatively, recommendations for expedited consults can also be initiated from WCB's RTW centres following completion of assessments such as: Medical Status Examination (MSE), Back Medical Examination (BME) or Shoulder Medical Examination (SME).

## Expedited surgical consultation timeline

Once a recommendation is made for expedited surgical services, a WCB claim owner will review the medical information on file and initiate the referral to the VSC if clinically appropriate. Please allow a minimum of **five business days** for the referral to be processed.

## What to expect from the VSC

Following a specialist appointment, a consultation report is typically submitted within **two days**. If surgery is recommended, it will be scheduled within **15 calendar days** from the date of consultation, ensuring timely access to treatment and support for the worker's recovery.

## Supporting a successful return to work

- **Reporting:** Provide consistent, complete and timely documentation. Clearly outline objective work restrictions when applicable, to support informed decision-making.
- **Modified work:** Engage workers in conversations about the benefits of modified duties, such as staying connected to their workplace and maintaining routine. Encourage exploration of suitable options with their employer.
- **Collaboration:** Participate in case conferences with workers and employers to ensure alignment with the care plan and monitor progress toward recovery and RTW goals.

## Additional support services from WCB

- Access to a broad network of clinicians, including physiotherapists, psychologists and interdisciplinary treatment centres across the province.
- Comprehensive support offerings, including home health care, assistive devices, complex wound care, transportation and family support.
- Direct access to WCB physicians for case discussions via the Physician Help Line at 1-855-498-4919.

