



When an old injury reappears

At first blush, the average postal customer thinks letter carriers have a pretty good job, walking or driving through the neighborhood delivering letters and parcels to their doors. Few people actually know what a letter carrier's day is really like: a morning sorting mail, haggling with the boss over how big the workload is, the physical endurance of moving and loading all of the mail for the day's deliveries.

Ask any new employee—the physical nature of our work takes a while to get used to. Add to that an abundance of overtime, working six or seven days a week, and there's little wonder so many new employees don't last very long. It's a tough job.

Despite it all, letter carriers continue to rise to the challenge and have earned the respect of the American public. You should be proud of what you do.

Military veterans may decide to become letter carriers due to the physical nature of the work and the opportunity to work outdoors. Carrying mail can be fun, enjoyable work. However, for some, the physical nature of the job can aggravate or accelerate old injuries suffered prior to becoming a letter carrier. Often it doesn't take very long for those injuries to reappear and make the job, and life, harder.

Be it an injury related to your previous military service or an old sports injury, the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (OWCP) will accept a claim when letter carrier work duties accelerate or aggravate pre-existing injuries. That's something most doctors don't understand.

Your work as a letter carrier does not need to be the primary cause of your injury. OWCP does not apportion causation, which means there need not be a certain percentage of your injury caused by work duties. If your work as a letter carrier aggravates or accelerates an old injury in any way, it can be

accepted as a workplace injury.

OWCP considers injuries caused by the aggravation or acceleration of underlying conditions as occupational disease claims.

Most doctors use the word "exacerbate" to describe when work duties cause an old injury to arise. OWCP adjudicates claims based on legal statutes, and words are important. OWCP does recognize "exacerbate," but will consider injuries "aggravated" or "accelerated" by work duties.

Letter carrier work duties often accelerate minor medical conditions, making them worse than they would have been absent letter carrier duties. When seeking treatment, injured workers should advise their doctor that OWCP treats acceleration just like direct causation.

A medical report diagnosing acceleration needs to explain how, absent your work duties, your diagnosed condition(s) would not have worsened. Military veterans are lucky that the Department of Veterans Affairs can provide them with a complete copy of their medical history related to their time in service.

With the history of an underlying condition, a doctor can document the acceleration of diagnosed conditions through historical medical reports and tests.

Successfully filing an occupational disease claim is a step-by-step process. You don't want to file form CA-2, Claim for an Occupational Disease or Illness, until you have a medical report where a doctor explains how your work duties affected your diagnosed injuries.

You need to give your doctor a work narrative explaining your day-to-day duties as a letter carrier. A good work narrative describes an average day on your route.

Mail volume and deliveries fluctuate every day, so avoid exact numbers.

Describe how long you sort and deliver mail. Estimate mail volumes, weights, distances and repetitions. Never exaggerate. Use action words that describe your work factors such as walking, carrying, reaching, pushing, pulling, etc. It is appropriate to reference any prior injuries you have suffered.

The next step is to take a copy of your work narrative to your doctor.

The medical report from your doctor needs to describe the causal relationship between specific work factors and the diagnosed injury. The report needs to be based on objective medical evidence, such as physical exams, tests, X-rays or MRIs. A good report describes the physiological mechanism by which specific work factors caused, aggravated or accelerated the diagnosed condition.

The doctor's report must list the diagnosed condition(s) and state his or her opinion with "reasonable medical certainty." Reasonable medical certainty is a bureaucratic term required by OWCP. A suitable medical report does not have to be lengthy; all of the necessary information can fit in a few pages. That makes it easier for OWCP claims examiners, too.

Once you have the medical report describing the causal relationship between your work and your medical condition, you can take the next step and register in ECOMP, OWCP's web portal, and then file the claim. Instructions on how to register and file claims via ECOMP can be found on the NALC website's Injured on the Job page at nalc.org/workplace-issues/injured-on-the-job.

Join the NALC Veterans Group

If you are interested in joining the group, complete the sign-up card at nalc.org/veterans.