

First Year in Cannabis Retail: High Injury Risk for Workers

The cannabis industry has experienced significant growth over the past decade, with new markets opening up as more states legalize medical and recreational marijuana. As the industry matures, it has created a variety of job opportunities, from cultivation and manufacturing to retail sales and customer service. However, as with any rapidly expanding industry, the growing cannabis retail sector presents unique challenges, particularly concerning worker safety.

Recent reports highlight a troubling trend: cannabis retail workers face a notably high risk of injury, particularly during their first year on the job. The nature of the work, combined with specific industry pressures and workplace conditions, contributes to this increased risk. In this article, we explore the factors contributing to high injury rates among cannabis retail workers, the impact of these injuries on workers and businesses, and potential solutions to mitigate this issue.

The Growing Cannabis Retail Industry

Cannabis retail workers are on the frontlines of the legal cannabis industry, assisting customers, managing inventory, operating point-of-sale systems, and ensuring compliance with state regulations. As legalization spreads across the U.S., the demand for retail workers in dispensaries has surged. According to the National Cannabis Industry Association (NCIA), the legal cannabis industry employs over 400,000 people, with a large portion working in retail.

Despite the increasing number of opportunities, cannabis retail work is far from risk-free. A recent survey by the Cannabis Workers Coalition found that cannabis retail workers are experiencing injury rates at significantly higher levels than those in many other retail sectors. The study indicated that the majority of injuries among cannabis retail workers occur during their first year on the job. These injuries can range from minor strains to more severe accidents requiring medical treatment and time off.

Why Is the First Year So Risky?

There are several reasons why the first year in cannabis retail is particularly dangerous for workers. These factors include physical demands, high turnover rates, inadequate training, and challenging work environments. Let's explore these in more detail.

Physical Demands of Cannabis Retail Work

Cannabis retail involves a range of physical tasks that can lead to injuries. Workers are required to stand for long hours, often on hard floors, leading to strain on the legs and back. They also frequently carry heavy bags of product, stock shelves, and maneuver large amounts of inventory. These physical demands can take a toll on both seasoned employees and newcomers, but workers in their first year often lack the experience to manage their bodies in ways that can prevent injury.

The risk of repetitive stress injuries is also a significant concern. Cannabis retail employees often perform the same tasks day in and day out, such as bending to restock products or typing on registers. These repetitive motions can lead to strains, sprains, and even long-term musculoskeletal disorders.

High Turnover and Inexperience

The cannabis retail industry, like many other service sectors, is plagued by high turnover rates. In fact, the cannabis industry's turnover rate is estimated to be around 40% annually, significantly higher than in many other retail industries. This high turnover means that many workers are new to the job, which contributes to the higher injury rates in the first year.

Inexperienced employees often lack the knowledge to properly assess risks or know the best techniques for lifting, reaching, or performing other physically demanding tasks. New workers are also more likely to make mistakes under stress or pressure, which can lead to accidents or injuries. Furthermore, inexperienced employees may be less likely to report minor injuries until they become more severe, delaying proper treatment and recovery.

Insufficient Training and Safety Protocols

Training and safety protocols are critical in reducing workplace injuries, yet many cannabis retailers fall short in this area. Cannabis retail employees need a combination of training in both product knowledge and safe working practices. While product training is usually a priority in cannabis dispensaries, safety training can sometimes be neglected or treated as secondary.

For new workers, having a clear understanding of how to avoid physical strain, recognize hazards, and use proper lifting techniques is essential. However, some dispensaries fail to offer comprehensive safety training, and as a result, employees are more likely to sustain injuries. Additionally, safety equipment such as anti-slip mats, ergonomic counters, or back support cushions may be missing or inadequate in some dispensaries, further contributing to the risk of injury.

Workplace Stress and Environment

The cannabis retail environment can be stressful, especially for new employees who are still learning the ropes. Cannabis dispensaries are subject to a range of strict state regulations, meaning employees must stay vigilant and adhere to complex legal and compliance requirements while serving customers. The combination of strict regulations, customer pressure, and the fast-paced nature of the job can create an environment ripe for accidents.

In addition, many cannabis dispensaries are small businesses with limited staff, which means employees may be asked to perform multiple roles, increasing their workload and the likelihood of injury. Workers who are trying to juggle inventory management, customer service, and security measures without proper breaks or support can quickly become fatigued, which can lead to mistakes or physical strain.

Common Injuries in Cannabis Retail

Cannabis retail workers are vulnerable to a wide variety of injuries, many of which are common in other retail sectors. These include:

Musculoskeletal Injuries: Lifting heavy products, standing for long periods, or performing repetitive motions can lead to back pain, neck strain, and repetitive stress injuries (RSIs) such as carpal tunnel syndrome.

Slip and Fall Accidents: Spills and wet floors, combined with the fast-paced work environment, make slip-and-fall injuries common in dispensaries.

Cuts and Lacerations: Cannabis retail workers often handle glass jars, packaging, and sharp tools, making cuts and lacerations common injuries.

Stress-Related Injuries: The physical and mental stress of working in a high-demand environment can lead to burnout, fatigue, and even anxiety-related health issues.

Burnout and Fatigue: Long hours and demanding work can lead to physical and mental exhaustion, increasing the likelihood of accidents.

Addressing the Issue: Solutions for Improving Safety

While cannabis retail work can be physically demanding, there are several steps employers can take to reduce the injury risk for employees, particularly those in their first year on the job.

Invest in Comprehensive Training

Training should be a cornerstone of any retail cannabis operation. New workers should receive thorough onboarding that includes both product knowledge and safety procedures. This should include education on proper lifting techniques, how to manage repetitive movements, and how to recognize and report potential hazards. Regular refresher courses can also help reinforce safe practices and remind employees of their rights and responsibilities.

Improve Workplace Ergonomics

Ergonomic improvements can go a long way in reducing injuries in the workplace. Dispensaries should invest in anti-fatigue mats for employees who stand for long periods, adjustable-height counters for those who may need to lift or reach items, and supportive chairs or stools where appropriate. Ensuring that employees have a comfortable workspace can help reduce musculoskeletal injuries significantly.

Promote a Culture of Safety

Creating a safety-first culture in the workplace can help employees feel more comfortable reporting injuries and hazards. This includes fostering open communication, encouraging workers to take breaks, and making sure there is a clear and accessible process for reporting and addressing workplace injuries.

Provide Mental Health and Stress Management Support

Workplace stress is a major factor in employee safety. Offering mental health support, whether through counseling services or stress-management programs, can help employees manage the mental and emotional challenges of working in the cannabis retail environment.

Increase Staffing Levels

High turnover and understaffing contribute to worker fatigue and accidents. Cannabis retailers should aim to maintain appropriate staffing levels so that employees do not feel overworked. This will help prevent fatigue-related injuries and ensure that employees can take necessary breaks to recover and recharge.

Reducing Risk for a Growing Industry

The cannabis retail sector presents significant opportunities for workers, but it also comes with unique challenges, especially in terms of worker safety. Injuries are unfortunately common during the first year in cannabis retail due to physical demands, inexperience, insufficient training, and a stressful work environment. However, with proper safety protocols, training, and workplace improvements, these risks can be mitigated.

By addressing these safety concerns, cannabis retailers can not only protect their employees but also improve productivity, reduce turnover, and ensure that their operations remain sustainable in the long run. The growth of the cannabis industry depends on a healthy, well-trained workforce, and investing in worker safety is key to achieving this goal.

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