Going back to work after an injury often brings mixed feelings. You might want the normal rhythm of a workday, the paycheck, your coworkers. At the same time, you may worry about pain, reinjury, or being pushed into tasks you cannot safely perform. As a workers compensation lawyer, I have watched these moments become turning points. Handle them with care, and you protect your health, your wage rights, and your long term position with the company. Rush through them, and you risk months of setbacks and an avoidable fight over benefits.

What light duty really means in practice

Light duty is not a label, it is a set of concrete limitations. The only way to know if a light duty job fits you is to compare a doctor’s restrictions to the real world demands of the assignment. A typical restriction might read: no lifting over 15 pounds, no overhead reaching with the right arm, and no continuous standing more than 30 minutes without a 5 minute seated break. That document is your guide and your shield. Everything about a proper light duty offer should match those lines.

In the field, light duty takes many shapes. A warehouse worker might be offered scanning and labeling while seated at a packing station. A nurse recovering from a shoulder injury might move to patient education calls. A delivery driver could be assigned to route planning and inventory control. None of these are perfect substitutes for your usual role, and they do not have to be. But they must be safe and medically consistent.

If your employer uses the phrase light duty to mean business as usual with a smile, that is not legitimate. I had a case where a forklift operator with a 10 pound limit was placed on sweeping duty. On paper, sweeping sounded gentle. In reality, it meant hauling piles of broken pallets and cement debris to a bin 60 yards away. Within two shifts, his back spasmed and he ended up in the emergency room. Words on a form matter. So do the small frictions of a real job site.

Who decides and how it should flow

Three voices matter here: your treating doctor, your employer, and the insurer. The doctor sets restrictions. The employer determines whether it has work available within those bounds. The insurer adjusts your benefits depending on whether you are off work or partially working.

Healthy process looks like this. The doctor sees you, writes clear restrictions, and gives you a copy. You share those with the employer. The employer puts forward a written light duty offer that lists the tasks, schedule, expected duration, and how each duty honors the restrictions. You review it before you say yes, ideally with your doctor or an experienced advocate. If you accept, you continue to see the doctor. Restrictions change only when the doctor updates them.

It goes sideways when the chain of communication breaks. One common issue is a vague form from the clinic that says light duty as tolerated. That phrase invites trouble. Pain tolerance is subjective and varies by the hour. Another issue is an employer that calls with a verbal offer but never commits duties to paper. When the plan shifts minute by minute on the shop floor, no one can prove what was agreed.

Your pay and benefits on light duty

Most states divide wage loss benefits into two buckets. If you are completely off work because your doctor says no work, you typically receive temporary total disability, often around two thirds of your average weekly wage,

subject to caps. If you can work some hours or at reduced pay, benefits usually shift to temporary partial disability, which pays a portion of the difference between your old earnings and your current light duty earnings.

Numbers matter here. Suppose you earned 1,050 dollars per week pre injury. On full TTD, you might receive about 700 dollars per week, subject to your state's maximum. If you return to light duty at 15 dollars per hour for 30 hours, you gross 450 dollars. Many states would then pay a fractional benefit based on the 600 dollar difference between your old wage and your current wage. That calculation can be 66.67 percent of the difference, again up to a cap. So you might receive around 400 dollars in partial benefits plus your 450 dollar paycheck, for total weekly income near 850 dollars. That is more than TTD alone, which can make a safe, legitimate light duty assignment financially sensible.

Keep an eye on differentials like shift pay, hazard pay, commissions, or overtime. Some employers drop you to straight day shift for light duty, which cuts your take home pay. That can be appropriate if the assignment is genuinely within restrictions, but the wage loss should be reflected in partial benefits. If your checks do not reflect that, call the adjuster in writing and request a recalculation using a clear pay record. When necessary, a workers compensation lawyer can request a formal hearing to correct the rate.

What makes an offer suitable

A suitable light duty offer respects the letter of your medical restrictions and the spirit of safety. It is specific about duties. It has a defined schedule, start date, and supervisor. It avoids make work that quietly pushes you back into the tasks that caused the injury. The safest offers plan for breaks, provide needed equipment, and assign a point person who can adjust tasks if you flare or fatigue.

Other factors count. Commute distance should be comparable to your pre injury commute. A surprise reassignment across town for the same pay can be an undue burden. Training is relevant, too. If the job depends on software or procedures you have never used, someone should budget time to teach you properly. Throwing you into a new role without instruction is unfair and often unsafe.

Finally, the offer should be temporary while you continue to treat. Genuine light duty is a bridge, not a trap door. I become wary when an employer labels a position temporary while quietly moving to make it permanent without medical clearance or interactive discussion.

When to say yes and when to pause

As a general rule, if the job matches clear restrictions and you feel you can try it, consider saying yes. Work can speed recovery by building tolerance and routine. Your wage picture may improve. And if the employer is genuinely accommodating, returning helps preserve that relationship.

Press pause when something does not line up. If your doctor never reviewed a job description, ask for that review. If the tasks involve a risk the doctor did not consider, make that clear. On more than one occasion, I have asked a client to wait one business day while we obtained a written offer and sent it to the doctor for confirmation. A 24 hour pause can prevent a 6 month setback.

A short checklist before you accept a light duty offer

- Get a copy of your written restrictions, not just the verbal summary.
- Ask for a written offer that lists tasks, schedule, duration, and supervisor.
- Compare each listed task to each restriction, item by item.

- Confirm in writing how your pay will be handled and whether partial benefits apply.
- Share the offer with your doctor and get confirmation that it is safe to try.

How to read a light duty letter like a pro

Good offer letters read like job descriptions. Look for verbs that describe motion and load, such as lift, carry, push, pull, reach, climb, crouch, stand, sit. Quantities matter. If the letter says occasional lifting up to 25 pounds, match that to your 15 pound limit. Frequency words are clues. Occasional often means up to one third of the day. Frequent usually means up to two thirds. Constant means the task repeats most of the day. If the letter does not use these terms, ask for clarification.

Duration should be short at first, often two to four weeks, with a medical reevaluation already scheduled. That lets the doctor adjust your plan. If the employer wants to set the assignment for three months with no review, that is too long without a medical checkpoint.

Finally, look for a mechanism to report problems. There should be a chain of communication that includes your supervisor, HR, and your claim contact. If you flare, who has authority to swap tasks or send you home to rest? If the letter is silent, ask.

Talking to your doctor so your restrictions reflect your job

Doctors write better restrictions when they understand your work. Bring a copy of your job description. If your employer cannot provide one, write a one page summary that covers weights, positions, repetitive movements, and the longest stretches you are on your feet. Add details a generic form never captures. For example, mention that your 15 pound parts are stored at shoulder height, which turns a simple lift into an overhead reach. Or explain that your route involves five flights of stairs because the freight elevator is unreliable.

Report pain honestly. If you can do an activity for 10 minutes but it swells for the next 6 hours, say so. These nuances help a physician prescribe break schedules or positional changes. When a doctor writes no lifting over 10 pounds and a 5 minute rest every 30 minutes of standing, that specificity protects you at work and during any later dispute over benefits.

Privacy, releases, and healthy boundaries

Carriers often send broad medical releases. You can sign a limited release that covers records related to the work injury only. Employers do not need your full medical history to assess light duty. HR can receive restrictions and a yes or no on the proposed duties, not the details of your diagnosis.

If a supervisor asks what medications you take or whether you plan to have surgery, you may decline politely and refer them to HR. Keep the focus on what you can safely do, not on your entire medical story.

The creep of undocumented tasks

One hazard of light duty is creep. You start at the desk, but within a week you are back near the line, then someone asks for help just for a minute. A minute becomes an hour. You lift a box to be a team player. No one writes it down. By the time you flare, the chart shows you tolerated the job, full stop.

Protect yourself with short notes. At the end of each shift, jot a few lines: duties performed, any pain spikes, any tasks that approached or exceeded restrictions, and to whom you reported issues. Email yourself from a personal account so the record is time stamped. If a task crosses a line, tell your supervisor on the spot, and follow up in

writing. If the employer wants you to try something outside the restrictions, ask for that instruction in writing and copy HR. In my experience, risky requests dry up when someone has to attach their name to the decision.

When the employer has no light duty

Some employers simply do not have a safe fit. If your doctor says no work or restrictions are too tight to be accommodated, you should remain on temporary total disability. Do not feel pressured to invent a role that does not exist. In a few states and for certain injuries, vocational rehabilitation may be available to help retrain you for different work. Programs vary, but a typical plan might fund a certificate program and pay a weekly maintenance benefit while you train or conduct a structured job search.

Document any statements like we do not have anything right now or we cannot accommodate. Ask for those statements in writing if possible. If the insurer tries to suspend benefits anyway, your notes can anchor a formal challenge.

The ADA, reasonable accommodation, and the interactive process

Workers compensation focuses on wage replacement and medical care. The Americans with Disabilities Act and similar state laws address job rights. If your injury leaves you with lasting limitations, the employer may need to engage in an interactive process to consider reasonable accommodations. That process is a conversation, not a one time form. Examples include ergonomic equipment, schedule changes, reassignment to a vacant role, or modified duties that do not remove essential functions.

Two key rules stand out. The employer does not have to create a new position, and it does not have to eliminate essential functions. But it must consider adjustments that let you perform those functions safely. If you feel the door is closed before the conversation begins, note that and ask to involve HR. A workers compensation lawyer who understands ADA rights can align both tracks so your medical recovery, benefits, and job protections move in sync.

Retaliation, job security, and attendance points

Most states forbid retaliation for filing a workers compensation claim or requesting accommodation. Retaliation cases often look like sudden discipline for minor issues after years of clean performance, or a termination for absence while you are off under doctor’s orders. If your employer uses an attendance point system, request that absences related to the injury be coded properly. FMLA leave might also run in parallel if you are eligible, which can preserve your job for up to 12 weeks in a 12 month period. Be mindful that FMLA and workers compensation are separate. You can take both, and in many cases you should.

Light duty while on FMLA can be tricky. FMLA is job protected leave. You cannot be forced to accept light duty while on FMLA, but you can choose to do so. If you decline light duty and remain on FMLA, your workers compensation TTD benefits should continue if the doctor says you cannot work. The right path depends on your income needs, pain level, and long term goals with the employer.

Unions, seniority, and bid systems

If you are in a union environment, your collective bargaining agreement can shape light duty. Some CBAs create a rotating list for temporary assignments, limit how long a light duty slot can last, or protect seniority rights if you move to a different shift. Bring your steward into the discussion early. In a rail yard case I handled, a member’s temporary transfer would have permanently bumped him down the bid ladder. The union flagged it, HR reworked

the plan, and he returned to his original slot after healing. Clear communication prevented a career long penalty for a temporary injury.

Surveillance and social media

Insurers sometimes conduct surveillance during disputed return to work periods. The goal is to capture you performing a task that appears to exceed your restrictions. Do not panic about this. Live your life, follow your doctor’s advice, and be consistent. If you can lift your toddler for 5 seconds at waist level, that does not mean you can load 40 pound boxes for 8 hours. But avoid posting videos of new home projects or gym feats. Posts lack context and can be misread. When in doubt, keep your social media quiet until your case resolves.

Independent medical exams and utilization review

If your doctor keeps you off work or sets tight restrictions, the insurer may request an independent medical exam. IMEs are not truly independent, but they are part of many systems. Attend the exam, be respectful, and stay factual. Describe your limits consistently with what you have told your treating doctor. Afterward, request a copy of the report. If it conflicts with your experience, your attorney can challenge it or develop counter evidence.

Treatment requests can be denied through utilization review. This can slow recovery and complicate return to work. Track denials and appeal deadlines carefully. In states with strict timelines, a missed appeal can lock in a denial. I often see cases where a denied course of physical therapy leads to a rough light duty week, which then triggers a spiral of pain and missed shifts. Persistent, timely appeals keep care on track.

Three grounded examples

A forklift driver with a 25 pound lifting limit receives an offer to manage inventory counts and radio calls from the dock office. The tasks are seated, with short walks to check labels. The pay drops by 2 dollars per hour because there is no night shift differential. We confirm partial benefits will offset the difference. The doctor okays the plan for 3 weeks with a follow up. The employee tracks tasks and notes that end of shift radio traffic gets intense, causing neck strain. The supervisor adds a headset. After four weeks and eight physical therapy visits, restrictions ease to 35 pounds, and the driver transitions back to the floor gradually, two hours per day on the lift, then four, then **You can find out more** a full shift.

A hospital nurse rehabbing a rotator cuff tear is told to work at the front desk. The letter says clerical tasks only. On day two, a charge nurse asks for help repositioning a 180 pound patient. The nurse declines and references the restriction letter. HR supports her. She documents the request and signs her time card as clerical. When the surgeon extends restrictions due to inflammation, the hospital continues clerical duty without a pay cut, honoring the clinical ladder. Keeping the paper trail crisp protects her license and her benefits.

An office technician with carpal tunnel is cleared for alternate duty that avoids sustained typing. The employer suggests scanning old files. That looks good until we ask about the hardware. The scanner is manual feed, which requires pinching every page. The doctor revises restrictions to limit repetitive pinch and grip. The employer upgrades to an auto feed scanner and adds a foot pedal for start and stop to reduce hand strain. A careful equipment review turns a near miss into a safe assignment.

How a workers compensation lawyer helps at this crossroads

Timing and documentation win these battles. A workers compensation lawyer can tune your strategy to the rules in your state and the facts of your job. In the first 48 hours after an offer, we can:

- obtain and review the written offer against your restrictions, line by line
- calculate your average weekly wage and forecast partial benefits so you know the financial impact
- communicate with your doctor to confirm or refine restrictions based on a real job description
- secure written clarifications from HR about duties, schedule, and who can adjust tasks if you flare
- set up a paper trail that captures task creep, pay discrepancies, and any retaliation signals

Sometimes we advise a cautious yes with guardrails: a two week trial, a dedicated supervisor, and a clear return to the doctor on the calendar. Other times we recommend a pause while we tighten the medical language or press the insurer on overdue treatment that would make work safer. If a dispute ripens, we request an expedited hearing. Judges tend to respect clear restrictions, written offers, and consistent self reporting. The side with better records usually wins.

What to do if light duty exceeds your restrictions

- Stop the unsafe task and notify your supervisor immediately, stating the specific restriction involved.
- Document the incident in writing the same day and send it to HR and the adjuster.
- Seek prompt medical evaluation to update restrictions if your symptoms flared.
- Request a revised assignment in writing that matches the doctor’s limits.
- If the employer insists, contact a workers compensation lawyer to pursue benefit reinstatement and, if needed, penalties.

Keep your paperwork clean and your story consistent

Save every restriction slip, offer letter, timesheet, and pay stub. Keep a simple log on your phone or a notebook that records each day’s duties and pain levels in a few lines. If your pay is lower than expected, screenshot your direct deposit, ask payroll for an earnings statement, and send both to the adjuster with a brief note. Clear, calm communication usually solves these issues within a week. When it does not, those same records become exhibits that compel action.

If your work schedule changes, note who made the change and why. If HR asks you to sign a form, read it. Forms that look routine sometimes include language that you accept duties as assigned without regard to restrictions. Strike that language, initial the change, and keep a copy. If the employer refuses altered language, that tells us where we stand.

State lines matter, so get local advice

Workers compensation is a state system, and details vary. Some states pay two thirds of the difference for temporary partial disability. Others use different formulas. Some require written job offers to suspend benefits if you refuse light duty. Others allow a verbal offer to count. Deadlines for appealing treatment denials can be as short as 10 days or as long as 30. Vocational rehabilitation exists in some places and not in others. An experienced local attorney can translate your state’s rules into a plan you can execute.

The path forward

Returning to work on light duty can be a smart step toward full recovery, but only when the assignment respects your body and the law. Look for specifics, not slogans. Put things in writing. Keep your doctor in the loop. Ask

questions about pay and benefits before you clock in. Most employers want to do the right thing when you give them a clear map. When they do not, steady advocacy and clean records close the gap.

I have seen light duty speed healing, protect income, and preserve good jobs. I have also seen it mishandled, turning solvable injuries into chronic problems. The difference lies in details and follow through. If you are unsure about an offer, or if you feel pressure to accept unsafe tasks, pause and get advice. A few focused steps now can spare you months of pain and a hard fight later, and a workers compensation lawyer can shoulder that load with you so you can focus on getting well.