

## KEY FINDINGS

- Barriers to return-to-work (RTW) included the lack of medical resources, treatments and RTW plans specific to firefighting, modified work that is not suitable or meaningful, pressures from the employer and co-workers to RTW before being fully recovered, and the heavy physical demands of firefighting.
- Firefighters identified that medical treatments facilitated the recovery of an injury, and the availability of meaningful and suitable modified work helped them RTW.

## Learning Objectives

At the conclusion of this activity, participants will be able to:

- Describe the facilitators and barriers to RTW for firefighters with musculoskeletal injuries
- Identify the strategies and recommendations to overcome the barriers of RTW for injured firefighters
- Recognize that facilitators and barriers of RTW for injured firefighters can vary based on different contexts and personal experiences

## Background

- Firefighters have increased risk of musculoskeletal injuries due to their job demands<sup>1</sup> which can be very costly. For example, a Canadian study in 2012 identified that 244 firefighter injury claims costed \$555,955.<sup>2</sup>
- There is a lack of research exploring firefighters' opinions of return-to-work (RTW) processes.

## Objective

To explore what Canadian career firefighters understand about RTW procedures implemented in their workplace and to understand what firefighters believe the facilitators and barriers to RTW are

## Methods

- Qualitative description methods<sup>3</sup>
- Purposeful sampling was used to recruit Canadian career firefighters (volunteer firefighters were excluded)
- Data was collected through semi-structured interviews by two experienced interviewers.
- Inductive coding and thematic analysis were performed by two researchers independently. The researchers met to discuss codes, categories and themes.<sup>4</sup>

## Results

- 38 firefighters (33 men, 5 women) participated
- One overarching theme, **'Factors affecting return-to-work depended on personal experiences and context'**, was identified as some RTW facilitators were also reported as barriers in different contexts (Table 1)
- Five themes were identified (Figure 1)

### Lack of accessible medical resources can delay RTW

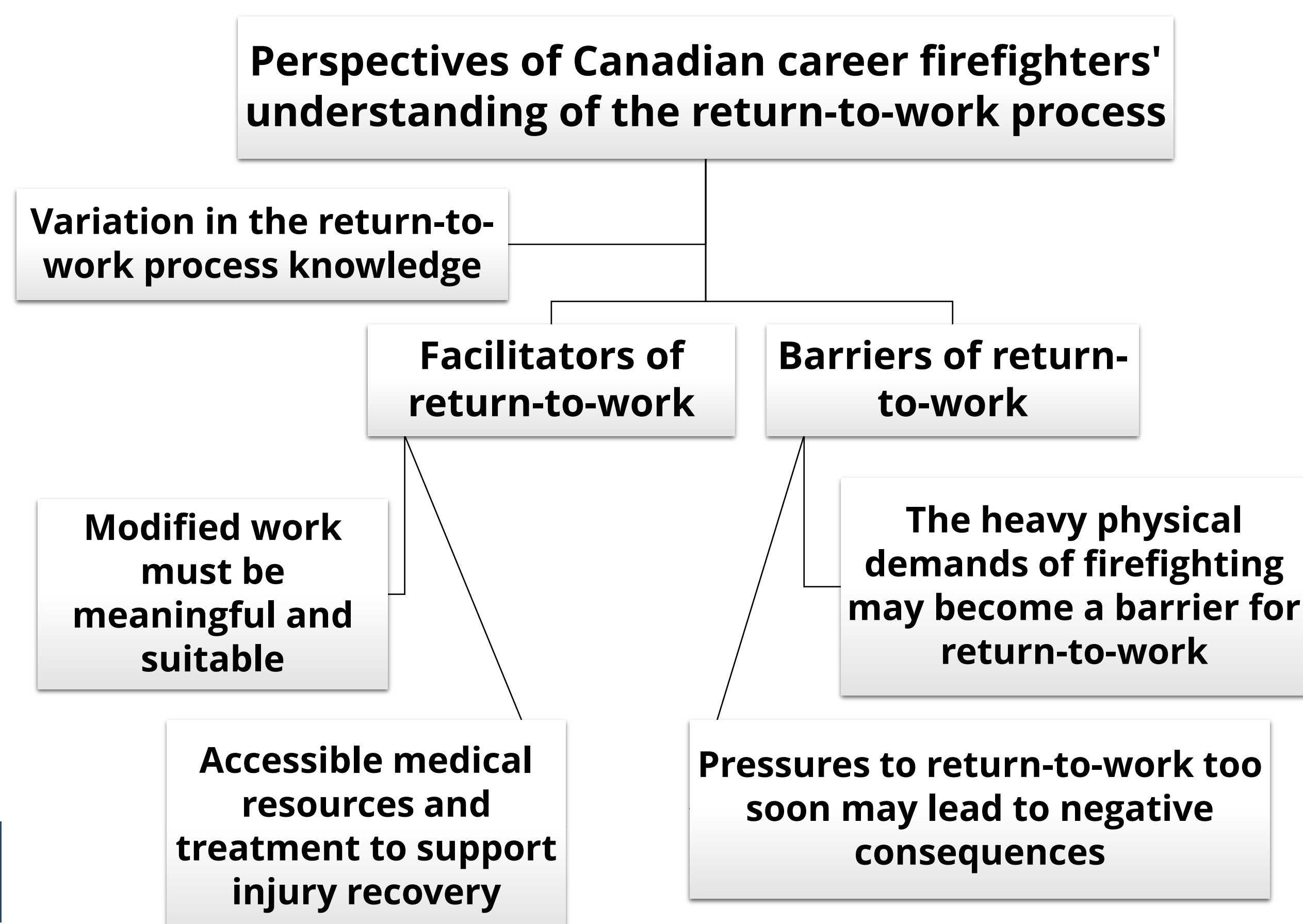
*"It's important to do physiotherapy and massage... you need to get your body back in shape to do firefighting duties."*

*"In [rural communities], it's lack of medical resources. Many of my staff did not have a family doctor... Also, the physiotherapy and occupational therapy assets in [our town] are limited. So, access to those is a bit of an impediment."*

**Table 1: The facilitators of return-to-work and the barriers of return-to-work (RTW).**

Facilitators of return-to-work	Barriers of return-to-work
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Access to light duty options that are meaningful and flexible to promote recovery at work</li> <li>Gradual progression of the light duties allows workers to prepare to return to firefighting duties, avoiding further injury</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of available light duties</li> <li>Stigma around light duties and/or light duties that are not meaningful can push firefighters to return to their firefighting duties before they have recovered</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Accessible medical care</li> <li>Receiving treatments that are covered by benefits in a timely manner</li> <li>Firefighter-specific rehabilitation plans</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of access or delays to receiving medical care</li> <li>Healthcare providers who are unaware of the demands of firefighting leading to inferior care and RTW assessments</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Firefighter-specific exercise plans to recover and regain physical abilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Firefighters need to be fully recovered and physically fit to perform firefighting tasks</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Passion for firefighting work can motivate firefighters to recover and regain function quickly to RTW</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>External pressures cause firefighters to RTW too soon, leading to reinjury</li> </ul>

**Figure 1: Themes identified from the qualitative thematic analysis**



### Heavy physical demands of firefighting can make it more difficult to RTW

*"Little injuries have more of an effect on us than any other worker I believe, because like a twisted ankle, most people could go in to work and do their job 100%, whereas a twisted ankle prevents me from doing my job even close to 100%."*

### Modified work must be meaningful to be beneficial

*"That's where modified work becomes very important for our members and ourselves for making sure that we return to work when we're ready to work and not injure ourselves further by coming back too early."*

*"They just force you into whatever is available... He sat at a desk. They put him prevention, but he didn't actually do anything."*

### Pressures to RTW too soon can lead to negative consequences

*"There's probably a bit of a stigma around being off work because of an injury. There's kind of the older mentality of just suck it up, you should be able to work through it."*

## Conclusion and Discussion

### Recommendations based on the findings:

- Clearly outlined RTW processes and procedures to increase awareness in firefighters and management
- Assessments and treatments should be targeted to firefighting duties and their physical demands
- Employers should provide health care professionals with physical demands analyses and job descriptions to increase their awareness of the firefighting duties
- Adequate benefits plans for treatments are needed
- More options for modified work that are suitable and meaningful are needed; firefighters should choose their modified duties from these modified work options
- Firefighters should be involved in the RTW planning
- The focus should be on recovery and regaining physical function, and firefighters should be assessed before returning to their firefighting duties
- Employers, supervisors and co-workers should be supportive rather than pressure firefighters to RTW

### Future Directions

- Qualitative research to further explore the disability management process for firefighters to create tailored disability management guidelines for firefighters

## Disclosures

In relation to this presentation, I declare the following, real or perceived conflicts of interest: **None**

## References, Affiliations and Acknowledgements

