Preexisting condition disputes sit at the center of some of the hardest workers' compensation cases. They are also among the most misunderstood. Many injured employees hear the same phrase from an insurance adjuster or employer representative: your back was already bad, your knee was already damaged, your shoulder problem did not start at work. Some people stop there and assume they do not have a case.

That assumption is often wrong.

A preexisting condition does not automatically block workers' compensation benefits. In many states, the real legal question is not whether the worker had a prior condition. The question is whether the job caused a new injury, aggravated an old one, accelerated the need for treatment, or made a manageable condition disabling. A Workers Compensation Lawyer spends a great deal of time proving that distinction with records, timelines, medical opinions, and careful case framing.

These disputes matter because the facts rarely arrive in a neat package. A warehouse worker may have old MRI findings from years ago but no pain until a lifting incident. A nurse may have mild degenerative disc disease, which is common with age, then suffer a sharp increase in symptoms after moving a patient. A machinist may have recovered from a prior shoulder strain, worked without restrictions for two years, then tear the same shoulder while pulling material overhead. Insurance carriers often point to the earlier history. A good lawyer looks at what changed, when it changed, and how to prove it.

Why preexisting conditions become the battleground

Insurance carriers challenge preexisting condition claims because they can reduce or deny exposure if they convince the decision-maker that the worker's current symptoms were inevitable or unrelated to the job. That strategy is not always unfair. Some claims truly do involve conditions that progressed naturally, without meaningful work contribution. But many denials lean heavily on incomplete records or on broad statements like degenerative changes are not work-related.

That phrase causes a lot of trouble. Degeneration can exist in the spine, knees, hips, shoulders, and wrists for years without limiting a person. Plenty of people have abnormal imaging and no real symptoms. Then a specific work event, or repeated physical job demands over time, turns a quiet condition into a painful, disabling one. Legally and medically, that difference matters.

A Workers Compensation Lawyer knows that preexisting condition cases are won or lost on precision. Not just what the MRI says, but what the worker's function looked like before the injury. Not just whether the worker saw a doctor five years earlier, but whether treatment had ended, symptoms had resolved, and normal work had resumed. Not just whether arthritis existed, but whether the job materially worsened it.

There is also a psychological piece to these disputes. Workers often feel accused of dishonesty when prior medical history becomes an issue. They may become defensive or minimize old treatment out of frustration. That can backfire. An experienced lawyer usually tells clients the same thing early: do not hide the prior condition. Own it, explain it, and put it in context.

The legal theory is usually aggravation, acceleration, or lighting up a dormant condition

Most jurisdictions recognize some version of a basic principle: an employer takes the worker as the worker is. If the job aggravates a preexisting condition, the resulting disability may still be compensable. The exact wording

varies by state, and some states apply stricter causation standards than others, but the core fight tends to revolve around whether work made a real difference.

That difference can take several forms. A worker may have had a dormant condition, meaning it existed but caused little or no active trouble. A work injury may light it up and trigger symptoms. In another case, the worker may already have intermittent pain, but a work incident sharply intensifies symptoms, increases treatment needs, or causes structural worsening. In yet another, repetitive work may accelerate a condition that otherwise would have progressed much more slowly.

This is where legal advocacy and medical evidence have to line up. Lawyers do not prove these claims through rhetoric alone. They prove them by showing the worker's before-and-after reality and tying that change to competent medical opinion.

The first job is building a clean timeline

When a lawyer takes one of these cases, one of the earliest tasks is to build a disciplined timeline. That sounds simple, but it is usually where the case either gains traction or starts to slip.

The timeline covers more than the date of injury. It traces prior complaints, prior treatment, job duties, symptom changes, work restrictions, and any gap between old symptoms and the current claim. If a worker had minor back pain three years earlier, completed physical therapy, returned to full duty, worked overtime, and then could not bend after a lifting incident, that sequence matters. If the worker had weekly pain management visits right up to the alleged work injury, that matters too.

In practice, a lawyer is looking for details like these:

- whether the worker had reached a stable baseline before the work injury
- whether the worker was performing regular job duties without formal restrictions
- whether symptoms changed in intensity, frequency, or character after the work event
- whether new treatment became necessary only after the work injury
- whether imaging or examination findings show a fresh change, even if old degeneration existed

That list may look straightforward, but each point can become contested. Adjusters often focus on any prior complaint, even if it was remote or resolved. A lawyer reframes the issue toward function and change over time.

I have seen cases turn on a single page from an old chart note. One note might say occasional low back soreness after yard work, improved with rest. Another might say chronic disabling pain with ongoing narcotic use. Both count as prior history, but they create very different compensation cases.

Medical records can help or hurt, depending on how they are read

Preexisting condition disputes are document-heavy. The lawyer typically collects family medicine records, orthopedic records, prior imaging, urgent care notes, physical therapy notes, and pharmacy histories. If there was a previous workers' compensation claim or an auto accident, those records matter too.

The challenge is that medical records are not written for litigation. They are written for treatment, often under time pressure. They contain shortcuts, assumptions, and sometimes clear mistakes. A chart may say no prior injury because the doctor meant no prior injury to this body part, or because the worker only answered the narrow question asked. Another record may say chronic pain when the worker really meant recurring pain, not continuous disability.

A strong Workers Compensation Lawyer does not ignore unfavorable records. The lawyer studies them, figures out how the insurer will use them, and decides whether they can be contextualized or rebutted. Sometimes the answer is in the surrounding treatment history. If the chart says severe knee pain for years but the worker never sought specialty treatment, missed no work, and played recreational sports, the actual functional picture may undercut that label.

Medical language itself can create confusion. Terms like degenerative, chronic, congenital, and exacerbation do not decide the case by themselves. Degenerative findings can be asymptomatic. Chronic can simply mean the problem has existed for a while, not that work played no role. Exacerbation can mean a temporary flare-up in one doctor's mind and a substantial worsening in another's. Lawyers often need to pin down what the treating doctor really means.

The treating doctor often becomes the pivot point

Many preexisting condition disputes rise or fall with physician opinion. The insurance carrier may send the worker to an independent medical examination, often called an IME, where a doctor hired by the carrier reviews records and offers a causation opinion. In many claims, that IME report says the current condition reflects natural degeneration or a mere temporary flare-up that has resolved.

A claimant's lawyer must be ready to answer that.

Sometimes the best evidence comes from the treating physician, especially one who saw the worker before and after the injury. That doctor may be in the strongest position to explain the difference in symptoms, function, and treatment needs. But doctors are busy, and not all of them are comfortable writing legal opinions. A lawyer often has to ask focused, useful questions rather than sending a vague request for support.

For example, asking a doctor whether work caused the condition may lead to an unhelpful yes-or-no answer. A better question might be whether the work event aggravated, accelerated, or materially worsened the preexisting condition, whether it changed the patient's baseline, and whether it created the need for additional treatment or restrictions. Those are the practical issues decision-makers care about.

The nuance matters. If the medical evidence supports only a short-term aggravation, the worker may still recover benefits, but perhaps only for a limited period. If the evidence supports a lasting worsening, the value of the case changes substantially. A careful lawyer does not overstate the medicine. Overreaching can damage credibility, especially when the records are mixed.

IME reports are often less final than they sound

Workers tend to feel crushed when they read an IME report. These reports are usually written with confidence. They may say the worker's symptoms stem entirely from age-related wear and tear, that no objective findings support injury, or that any work aggravation ended within weeks.

That is not the end of the case.

An IME is one medical opinion. Sometimes it is persuasive. Sometimes it is thin. Lawyers examine whether the doctor had complete records, whether the report misstated the history, whether the doctor ignored changed symptoms, and whether the reasoning actually matches the facts. An IME that cites a prior MRI but overlooks that the worker had been asymptomatic for years can be challenged. So can an opinion that labels everything degenerative without addressing a clear functional decline after a work incident.

Cross-examination becomes important here. If the case reaches a hearing, a lawyer may question the IME doctor about gaps in the review, the meaning of certain imaging findings, or whether asymptomatic degeneration can become symptomatic after trauma. Good cross-examination is rarely theatrical. It is usually measured and specific. The goal is to expose shortcuts, not to score points.

The worker's own history has to be consistent

One of the most common problems in these cases has nothing to do with medicine. It is inconsistency.

A worker tells the emergency room there was no prior pain, then tells a physical therapist there were similar symptoms years ago, then tells the IME doctor the condition was never a problem before. Those variations may have innocent explanations, but they create openings for the defense. The insurer argues the worker is unreliable, and credibility starts to erode.

An experienced lawyer prepares the worker to tell the truth with precision. If there was prior pain, say so. If it was different in degree or character, explain that. If there was prior treatment but full recovery followed, make that clear. If the worker had occasional soreness but remained fully functional until the work injury, that distinction should be stated plainly.

This is especially important in deposition or recorded statement settings. Broad absolutes like I never had any problem before are dangerous unless literally true. A more accurate statement might be that I had some minor back pain years ago, but I was working full duty, lifting normally, and did not need active treatment until this incident. That is both candid and credible.

Surveillance, social media, and side facts can reshape the dispute

Preexisting condition cases are fertile ground for side investigations. Insurers may review social media, look for prior accident claims, or compare current limitations with old records. If the worker claimed severe knee disability before the work injury in another case, that history may surface. If the worker posts videos doing heavy home projects while claiming total disability, the defense will use them aggressively.

A lawyer's role here is not only reactive. It is preventive. Clients should understand early that every prior claim, prior lawsuit, or prior injury report may become relevant. That does not mean the case is doomed. It means the facts need to be understood before the other side weaponizes them.

Sometimes the supposedly damaging evidence is less harmful than it first appears. A photo of someone at a family event says little about pain levels. A short video clip lifting groceries does not necessarily contradict a claim involving repetitive industrial lifting. But those distinctions must be explained carefully, and they are easier to explain when the claimant has been honest from the start.

Repetitive trauma cases require a different kind of proof

Not every preexisting condition dispute involves a single accident. Some arise from repetitive stress or cumulative trauma. These are often harder cases because the worker may not point to one dramatic moment. Instead, the shoulder got worse month after month from overhead work, or the carpal tunnel symptoms intensified after **Workers Compensation Lawyer** years of assembly-line repetition.

When preexisting degeneration exists, insurers frequently argue that the condition simply progressed with age. The lawyer's task is to show how the specific job demands contributed materially. That often means digging into the worker's actual tasks, frequency, force, posture, speed, production quotas, and duration of exposure.

A generic job title is not enough. A Workers Compensation Lawyer may need detailed testimony describing how often a nurse boosted patients during a shift, how many pounds a delivery worker handled, or how long a mechanic worked with hands above shoulder level. In some cases, ergonomics or occupational medicine opinions help. In others, the treating doctor's understanding of the workload is enough, if it is based on accurate facts.

These claims can be strong, but they demand specificity. Saying I used my hands a lot rarely wins the day. Explaining that the worker gripped pneumatic tools for six to eight hours per shift, five days a week, for several years paints a much clearer causal picture.

Apportionment can reduce value even when the claim is accepted

In some states, even if the worker proves a compensable aggravation, a preexisting condition may affect how permanent disability is valued. This is where the concept of apportionment comes in. Broadly speaking, apportionment is an effort to separate what portion of permanent impairment came from the work injury and what portion came from prior disease or prior injury.

Not every jurisdiction handles this the same way. Some focus more on whether work caused disability at all. Others allow more explicit allocation between industrial and non-industrial causes. Either way, a lawyer must evaluate the issue early because it affects settlement strategy, medical evidence, and client expectations.

This is one of those places where professional judgment matters. Some cases are worth fighting on compensability but settling pragmatically on extent of disability. Others warrant a full contest because the insurer is trying to attribute nearly everything to prior degeneration despite a major work-related change. The right path depends on the records, the doctors, the law of the state, and the client's goals.

A practical example from a common back claim

Consider a 52-year-old shipping worker with occasional low back soreness over the years. Ten years earlier, he had a short course of physical therapy after a weekend strain. He did not miss time from work, had no restrictions, and did not receive ongoing treatment. He then worked full duty, including overtime in peak seasons.

One morning he lifts a heavy container, feels a sharp pop, and develops pain radiating into his leg. The new symptoms are constant, not occasional. He cannot tolerate prolonged standing and now needs prescription medication, repeat therapy, and a surgical evaluation. Imaging shows disc degeneration that likely predated the accident, but it also shows a herniation consistent with the current radicular symptoms.

The insurer denies the claim, citing prior back problems and age-related degeneration.

A lawyer handling that case would likely emphasize several points. The prior history was remote and limited. The worker had returned to baseline for years. He performed demanding work without restrictions. The symptom pattern changed after the incident, especially with leg pain and functional decline. The post-incident treatment needs were markedly different. If the treating spine doctor supports causation or aggravation, the case becomes much stronger.

Now change one fact. Suppose the worker had been treating monthly with pain management for severe back and leg pain right up until the alleged lifting event, and the symptoms after the event were workers comp attorney largely the same as before. That is a different case. It may still be compensable if the event worsened things materially, but the proof becomes more difficult. A good lawyer will say that plainly rather than selling false certainty.

Settlement strategy changes in preexisting condition cases

These disputes often settle, but they do not settle the way clean, undisputed injury cases do. Both sides are pricing risk. The worker worries about losing on causation. The carrier worries that a judge will find a substantial aggravation and order more treatment, wage loss, or permanent benefits than expected.

A lawyer evaluates not only the legal strength of the claim but also the medical future. Is the issue a limited course of therapy, or a likely surgery? Did the work injury create a temporary flare-up, or is the worker now permanently restricted? Are there competing doctors with credible opinions, or is one side's medical evidence clearly thin?

Timing matters. Settling too early, before the medical picture stabilizes, can leave money on the table. Waiting too long can also carry costs, especially if the worker needs income or faces uncertain causation proof. Much depends on whether additional medical development is likely to help. Sometimes one well-written treating doctor report changes the leverage of the entire case.

What workers should do when a prior condition becomes an issue

When preexisting conditions enter the case, panic usually leads to mistakes. There are a few practical rules that make a real difference:

- report the work injury promptly and describe what changed after it
- disclose prior injuries and treatment honestly, without minimizing or exaggerating
- follow through with medical care so the record reflects ongoing symptoms and limitations
- give your lawyer complete information about past claims, accidents, and diagnoses
- avoid broad statements that deny any prior problem if a record exists saying otherwise

Those habits do not guarantee success, but they prevent a manageable dispute from turning into a credibility problem.

The value of experience in these cases

Preexisting condition disputes reward lawyers who understand both medicine and narrative. The medicine matters because causation language, imaging findings, and treatment history have to be handled carefully. The narrative matters because judges and boards need a coherent explanation of what life looked like before work made things worse.

This is not a place for generic advocacy. The best results usually come from patient record review, focused physician communication, and realistic case positioning. Some claims should be pushed hard to hearing. Some should be negotiated once the strengths and weaknesses are clear. Some need a narrow argument for a temporary aggravation rather than an overreaching claim of total work causation.

A seasoned Workers Compensation Lawyer knows that a preexisting condition is not just a defense theme. It is a factual framework that has to be confronted directly. Done well, that approach often turns a denial built on old records into a claim grounded in current reality. The question is rarely whether the worker was medically perfect before the job injury. Very few people are. The real question is whether work changed the worker's condition in a way the law recognizes, and whether that change can be proven with credible, disciplined evidence.

Law Offices of Miguel Martínez, P.C.
Address: 1776 Vine St, Denver, CO 80206

Phone number: +13037475141

FAQ About Workers Compensation Lawyer

What not to say to a workers' comp attorney?

Never lie, hide facts, or omit prior injuries when speaking to your workers' comp attorney. Total honesty about your medical history, the accident details, and your activities is critical, because any inconsistencies can ruin your case credibility with the insurance company or judge.

What are the odds of winning a workers' comp case?

Most initial workers' compensation claims are approved without a formal trial. Nationally, only about 5% to 10% of claims are flatly denied. For cases that do face a formal dispute, hearing, or trial, the odds of winning generally hover around 50% or vary by state, depending heavily on legal representation and medical evidence.

When should you get a workers' comp lawyer?

You should hire a workers' comp lawyer if your claim is denied, your benefits are delayed, your injury requires surgery or causes permanent disability, or your employer pushes you to return to work too early or retaliates. You generally do not need a lawyer for minor injuries with smooth, undisputed processing.