



Start a Healthy Weight Culture

American business pays the price

Obesity is estimated to cost American business more than \$13 billion per year in higher health care costs, lower productivity, increased absenteeism, and other consequences of illness due to overweight.

How do we get started?

Foster a weight-healthy corporate culture.

There is no single way to get employees to adopt weight-healthy habits. Intermittent efforts—such as the six-week weight-loss contest or 10-week team weigh-in—are not enough. What's needed is an awareness created at work where adults spend most of their waking hours and where they can be informed and influenced about making lifestyle choices.

Lifestyle change isn't a quick fix. It's a long-term movement through the stages of change, from contemplation to action and then lifelong maintenance, whether it's weight loss or quitting smoking or physical activity. Therefore, employers must make a year-round corporate commitment in support of lasting lifestyle change. Ideally, success becomes a way of life and an ongoing work style. You, as health educator, can change the corporate culture for the better—rather than pushing a short-term campaign on the disease du jour, on and off during the year.

Whatever program you choose, own it. Name your program to give it life! Involve the members of your wellness committee—representatives of all employee groups—to create a similar identity for your weight-loss and weight-management programs. Such involvement begins with an awareness campaign (newsletters, recruiting members, single-session informational meetings and sign up).

Increased awareness will help ensure that your weight programs keep going—because not every employee who needs it is ready at any single point in time. You want your program to be up and running at that teachable moment and ongoing to provide continuing support.

Don't presume that weight management takes place somewhere else (at home, at restaurants, in grocery stores). Weight management occurs in your workplace.

Integrate

your weight-healthy culture

- Make weight health a core part of your employee health promotion program.
- Use voluntary health risk appraisals to obtain baseline data about your workforce as part of long-term wellness planning. Then integrate specific information (such as number of overweight and obese employees, number of employees with diabetes and heart disease, number of employees expressing interest in weight loss) as you plan your weight-loss programming.
- Build support into your benefits program, such as incentives and/or reimbursement.
- Reexamine and update your company policies on flex time and work release time to attend onsite meetings.
- Support employee sports teams and physical activities.
- Integrate weight health into various facets of the daily work environment including the food service (cafeteria/vending/catering). Require your vendors and caterers to provide nutritional information for cafeteria selections.
- Provide guidance on local restaurants/fast food/catering options (using Web resources or dining out guides).
- Support practical opportunities for physical activity during the workday (promote the value of taking the stairs, suggest walking paths or routes for lunch or breaks, establish activity groups).
- Encourage fitness interest groups in the workplace and outside (for example, promote community activities and sports, family leagues and outings).

Communicate

your weight-healthy message

- Incorporate healthy weight messages into all employee communications: print and electronic publications, intranet site or benefits page on your corporate intranet, email tips, posters and flyers, fitness center displays, kiosks, table tents in the cafeteria, signage in key locations throughout the company, and in voice-mail greetings for wellness staff.
- Communicate the positive impact of weight health on the workplace to managers and employees (perhaps an annual rundown of cost savings and measures of employee health/success, for example, increased competitiveness in the marketplace, fewer overall staff sick days).

Educate

employees to create awareness

- Build a take-one literature display provided by leading health organizations such as the American Cancer Society, American Diabetes Association and American Heart Association on the benefits of maintaining a healthy weight and reducing risk for chronic conditions.
- Invite employees to attend onsite health/weight-related screenings during the year.
- Educate employees about portion sizes and healthy meal ideas. Use onsite food services to support employees in their weight loss or maintenance efforts.
- Periodically invite guest speakers from the community (for example, a registered dietitian or personal trainer).
- Tap into your internal communication vehicles (newsletters, e-letters, intranet, email, posters, bulletin boards, flyers, mass voice messaging, TV/video displays, signs).

Incentivize

to increase participation

- Create an incentive (for example, partial or full reimbursement for attendance at company-sponsored weight-loss programs; attendance on paid work time).
- Offer employees a discounted or free subscription to a lifestyle magazine such as *Prevention*, *Weight Watchers Magazine* or *Mayo Clinic HealthQuest*. Alternatively, provide issues of these publications in public areas and employee lounges.
- Make weight health a source of pride for your employees. Create avenues for internal recognition (in company newsletters) as well as external (publicity, formal acknowledgment/commendation from the company CEO).
- Highlight weight-healthy role models among all levels of staff.
- Keep employee rewards consistent with healthy weight by serving healthful food selections (for example, at company-sponsored celebrations, annual meetings, daily meetings, cafeteria choices).
- Consider an allowance (or reimbursement or discounted rate) for health club memberships.

Offer

healthful food at work

Donuts at the breakfast meeting, rich chocolate cake for a co-worker's birthday, pasta salad soaked in oil for the lunch seminar: the state of nutrition in the workplace is grim. How can health promoters make a difference and support employees in their weight-loss efforts if you don't practice sound nutrition companywide?

To provide guidelines in such situations, faculty at the University of Minnesota's School of Public Health developed suggestions for offering healthy foods at meetings, seminars, and catered events (consistent with the USDA and HHS 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans).

The guidelines include suggestions for shaping healthy eating in the workplace, alternative options for food served at meetings and seminars, comparisons of healthy versus unhealthy foods, and caloric and fat information on popular food and beverage items. Some of the suggestions include offering healthy food choices such as **fruit, mini-muffins and mini-bagels, whole grain selections, and skim milk**, along with much smaller portions.

Also, the guidelines suggest **NOT providing food at mid-morning or mid-afternoon meetings, presentations, and seminars**—a suggestion that seems like an obviously healthy one, but would be a major shift in culture for some workplaces.

For more information, download and print the free resource document at www.ahc.umn.edu/ahc_content/colleges/sph/sph_news/nutrition.pdf



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