If your workforce is typical of American adults, two-thirds of your employees are overweight or obese. Excess weight can lead to a number of serious and costly illnesses, such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, several types of cancer, respiratory problems, and depression. For employers, the effects of obesity are not limited to having some workers with health problems. There is an enormous negative impact on the company’s bottom line, both from exploding healthcare costs and lost productivity. Fortunately, relatively small reductions in weight (5-10% of body weight) can have a significant impact in reducing these costs and improving employee productivity.

A Hefty Price for Excess Pounds
The price tag that companies pay for their employees’ excess weight is staggering. For the year 1994, obesity cost U.S. businesses an estimated $12.7 billion—$2.6 billion from mild obesity and $10.1 billion from moderate or severe obesity. Companies spend up to 52% more in annual healthcare costs on obese employees than they do on employees at a healthy weight. A large part of the cost of obesity comes from the way the condition worsens other diseases, such as type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease. These costs come from a variety of sources, including physician visits, outpatient and inpatient hospital charges, and prescription drugs.

Lost worker productivity is also very costly. Heavier workers experience more disability and have more health-related absences than thinner workers. For the year 1994, these absences cost U.S. employers an estimated $3.93 billion. It’s not simply about absenteeism, however. Excess weight is also linked to “presenteeism” — time spent on the job but performing at less than full capacity. A 2005 study published in the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine reported that obese workers cost employers more than an estimated $42 billion per year in lost productive time. Surprisingly, two-thirds of this cost was explained by presenteeism, while the remaining one-third was from absences.

Small Changes = Big Improvements
The good news is that weight loss can reduce the financial burden of obesity for employers and improve worker productivity and performance. Weight losses of 5-10% of initial body weight or the prevention of weight gain can translate into substantial health and economic benefits. Employers can help make this happen by providing a work environment that supports healthy weight loss. According to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) task force, worksite weight-management programs that include diet, exercise, support, and behavior skills are the recommended strategy to prevent or control overweight and obesity in the workplace. And there is proof that these programs work. For example, implementing a worksite

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A lifestyle-based weight-loss program has been shown to result in a reduction in risk factors for heart disease that is sustained for at least one year.  

Affordable Solutions Exist

Worksite weight-management programs do not have to be costly. For example, the same study that demonstrated a one-year reduction in risk factors for heart disease found that individually tailored programs did not provide better results than a group-based, more cost-effective program. And the benefits of a comprehensive weight-loss program extend beyond a reduced risk profile for heart disease. The medical treatment for those with diabetes, a growing source of healthcare costs, can also be significantly reduced using this approach.  

Corporate Solutions, the comprehensive group of weight-management offerings from Weight Watchers, provides employers a convenient, low-cost way to help reduce healthcare costs and boost employee productivity by bringing proven weight-management methods into the workplace. It makes the most of the worksite environment, providing the opportunity for employees to achieve lasting weight loss with a proven, science-based method that includes diet, exercise, behavior modification and, for those attending meetings, group support. 

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