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## Workplace wellness

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### From yoga to walks, employers are finding ways to encourage good health

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Margaret Brady and her co-workers at Morrissey & Co. practically have to chase after their boss when they join him for walks along Boston's Charles River.

The two- to three-mile jaunts are CEO Peter Morrissey's version of an employee wellness program for his 11-worker public relations firm.

"The 45 minutes to the hour that I'm out, I just feel that ... the cobwebs that you get after the coffee buzz wears off are gone," Brady said.

As health care costs increase, a rising number of companies are using workplace wellness programs to improve employees' health and reduce medical claims. These programs generally provide health information, and many also offer free or low-cost services such as medical checkups and weight management and smoking cessation classes. Some include fitness centers or subsidized memberships to local gyms.

One factor in rising health costs is Americans' growing tendency toward obesity. Moreover, said David Hunnicutt, president of the Wellness Councils of America, "the vast majority of Americans spend the vast majority of time at work. And it's sedentary."

Health experts say it's incumbent on employers to find ways for workers to get exercise and information about their health.

Many companies agree. So autoworkers at General Motors Corp. relax and stretch with yoga and Tai Chi classes offered just floors above the assembly lines in Flint, Mich.

Union Pacific Railroad employees can use a fitness center at even the most remote spots; the company used to have traveling fitness railcars before workers started staying in hotels.

Chrysler Group offers incentives for its employees to use its programs, giving out "well bucks" that can be redeemed for gym bags, golf balls and other gear. Employees earn the well bucks if they get a health screening, check out a book or video from the company's healthy life library or get a workplace massage.

Morrissey pays for half the cost of his employees' walking shoes. He also offers an office bicycle for those who don't want to walk.

"At first, honestly, I thought, "I have to get out there, I have to hurry, I have to get back," Brady said of the three-day-a week walks. But without them, she said her chances to exercise are "slim to none."

#### ON THE NET

Wellness Councils of America,  
[www.welcoa.org](http://www.welcoa.org)  
Centers for Disease Control,  
[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)  
Partnership for Prevention,  
[www.prevent.org](http://www.prevent.org)

A National Center for Health Statistics report released earlier this month said seven in 10 adults don't exercise regularly and nearly four in 10 aren't physically active at all.

Meanwhile, a federal government survey in 2000 found that 56.4 percent of Americans are overweight. Obesity can result in higher health claims and employee absenteeism.

Companies say wellness programs have proven effective, with reductions in blood pressure, smoking and cholesterol levels.

About 1,000 people participated in CIGNA's weight management program last year, and the average weight loss was 10 to 15 pounds, said Catherine Hawkes, assistant vice president of the insurer's employee health and work-life programs.

Roughly half of companies with more than 750 employees offer a comprehensive employee health promotion program, according to a National Worksite Health Promotion Survey from 1999, the most recent year such a survey was done.

Experts say the data needs to be interpreted carefully. For example, a company could send out a health newsletter and say it has a wellness program. Or, it could have a fitness center, but not encourage employees to use it.

Alex Hiam, CEO of the consulting firm Alex Hiam & Associates, said employers sometimes use wellness programs as recruiting tools, touting gyms, masseurs and yoga classes, but do little to promote their actual use or find out if employees really want those things.

"I'd favor fewer bells and whistles and (have) simpler programs that people really use," Hiam said.

The Wellness Council's Hunnicutt said that while more companies have wellness programs, they could do better. And Jack Mohen, with the Boston office of the recruiting company MRI, said he doesn't think companies really are all that concerned about wellness.

"I think they're zoning out on it," Mohen said. "The corporate culture today is, they should thank their lucky stars they still have a job."

But CIGNA's Hawkes argues that having programs just makes good sense.

For its work force, which is 78 percent female, CIGNA offers a breast feeding support program.

"Mothers who come back to work and breast feed miss fewer days of work," Hawkes said.

At KWE Associates, a small New York public relations firm, employees can sign up for a monthly 20-minute massage. Whether the massage has an actual health benefits isn't necessarily that important, employee Agatha Gogol said.

"It's just the idea that the people you are working for are geared and motivated about that," she said. "They're thinking about your ... wellness and they're not just "Work, work, work.""