

Companies ring in new year with weight-loss help for employees

A new year means, for many, a new resolution to lose weight and get fit. Companies are helping their employees do that, with incentives to use the gym, eat healthy, take walks and shed pounds. In the process, workers are calling in sick less often and filing fewer health claims.

Health costs are rising, and part of the culprit is obesity, says David Hunnicutt, president of the Wellness Councils of America. "The vast majority of Americans spend the vast majority of time at work," he says. "And it's sedentary."

Consider the statistics:

- A National Center for Health Statistics report reveals that seven in 10 adults do not exercise regularly. Nearly four in 10 admit to being physically inactive.
- The federal government reports that 56.4 percent of Americans are overweight, a condition that can result in higher health claims and employee absenteeism.
- One Dallas-based weight-loss program estimates that obesity contributes to 39 million lost work days a year and a health care bill of \$117 billion.

Employers aren't taking the news sitting down. About half of the companies with more than 750 employees offer a comprehensive health promotion program, according to a 1999 National Worksite Health Promotion Survey. Outsourcing firm Hewitt Associates estimates that 81 percent of all companies offer some sort of health initiatives. Among large companies, Hewitt says, at least a quarter offer weight-management services.

Many of them are getting serious about helping their employees get healthy. Some leaders:

- More than 400 CIGNA employees-and their benefit-eligible family members-participate in a company-sponsored stop-smoking program. All participants are surveyed to determine their smoking habits and barriers for quitting, and then work with a trained health educator online, over the telephone or through the mail.
- Microsoft Corp. has hired a weight-loss consultant to help employees cut sugar and fat from their diets and start exercising. The firm also has a jogging track, volleyball court and basketball court at one of its complexes, and sponsors a baseball league. Employees can use showers in the building and eat heart-healthy meals in the company cafeteria.

A few companies are appealing to their employees' pocketbooks in the firms' quest for a healthier work force: They're paying people to lose weight, stop smoking and get regular checkups. Examples:

- Chrysler Group employees earn "well bucks" when they get health screenings or participate in workplace wellness activities. They can cash in the well bucks for golf gear and gym bags.
- Boston public relations firm Morrissey & Co. pays for half of the cost of walking shoes for employees who join the firm's chief executive on two- to three-mile walks during the day.
- Theme park Dollywood rewarded 100 workers a total of \$2,050 when they shed a collective 410 pounds in a program that pays employees \$5 a pound to lose weight during the winter.

It seems to be money well spent. The rewards to health-conscious organizations range from lower absenteeism to more attractive health care premiums:

- Bank of America reports a return of \$6 for every \$1 spent on its health promotion program.
- Coors Brewing Co. boasted a savings of \$1.9 million in 1990 when it spent \$600,000 for wellness.
- Coca-Cola says it saves \$500 per employee per year in health care claims for those who joined its fitness program
- Prudential Insurance cut its major medical costs almost in half for participants in its wellness program.
- The city of Maple Grove, Minn., saved \$2.31 on its health care premiums for every dollar it spent on wellness last year.

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