

# The Importance of Promoting Health in the Workplace

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## Abstract

As a means of reducing risk for employees, many companies over the last several decades have introduced worksite health promotion programs. Such programs have historically resulted in reduced absenteeism, increased employee retention, reduced health care costs, and employee satisfaction. Employers are charged with assisting employees in retirement planning, and now they are recognizing the need to educate employees regarding those lifestyle factors which are most likely to assure their reaching their retirement years in good health. There is increasing evidence that health promotion and wellness programs have proven successful for many companies and employees. Most chronic diseases are associated with lifestyle practices. Among these are heart disease, cancer, and other chronic debilitating diseases such as arthritis and diabetes. Contemporary lifestyle may be an associated factor in the development and progression of these diseases. Education regarding prevention and management of these diseases may reduce loss of life, improve quality of life, and better utilize financial resources. Additionally, screening programs for early detection and assessment of risk factors for these diseases may prove a valuable component of the educational program. Early detection reduces absenteeism, often reduces cost of treatment, and improves the prognosis.

## THE COMPREHENSIVE WELLNESS PROGRAM

Early in the development of a comprehensive wellness program it is necessary for a company to assess its needs. Such an assessment can be accomplished by evaluating accident and Workers Compensation records and illness reports as well as medical records, particularly those associated with insurance records for medical conditions. The needs of employees can be evaluated through questionnaires, risk assessments, and medical screening programs.

After a company recognizes the need for a health promotion program, an administrator or director is essential. Resources which could be used by the program must be identified. Financial commitment to the program should be evaluated and a budget determined. Many companies are probably already doing more than they may realize. For example, some employers provide worksite screening programs for vision and hearing, or perhaps they are actually engaged in some form of education regarding health-related topics such as blood pressure control or smoking cessation.

Creating awareness is a vital part of developing a worksite health promotion program. The program must be visible if it is to be successful. Involvement of employees is necessary for a successful program. Employee risk assessment is also

beneficial to program development. This can be accomplished through monitoring cholesterol levels, blood pressure, and weight, and by providing employees with health risk appraisals or assessments so that they can evaluate their own personal health based upon family history and current health practices.

Increasing employee knowledge is essential to bring about lifestyle changes. Lectures, programs, printed information, and other activities can increase employees' awareness of positive health practices and critical issues such as recognition of symptoms which should be reported to a physician.

It is also beneficial for any wellness program to have follow-up and evaluation of effectiveness in order to assure that it meets the needs of both the employer and the employees. Lifestyle changes are a process, and sustaining positive lifestyle changes is often more difficult than making the changes in the first place. Individuals require support and assistance following acquisition of knowledge in order to make and sustain positive lifestyle behavioral choices.

## WELLNESS PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

Wellness or health promotion programs are often strengthened by activities. The size of the employee

population, socio-economic background, age, education, and gender are useful factors to be evaluated when developing program activities. Some popular activities used in wellness programs include awareness and information programs, behavioral change projects, and screening programs. Stress reduction activities may include provision of relaxation tapes or a relaxation room, support groups, stress management and relaxation training, flex-time, psychological counseling, reduction of environmental stressors, training in time management, exercise activities, and assertiveness training courses or courses for dealing with difficult persons or situations. Activities that may prove beneficial in reducing employee health problems related to smoking include smoking cessation programs, smoke-free zones or smoke-free facilities, removal of vending machines containing tobacco products from the facility, incentives to those who stop smoking, support groups, and initiation of no-smoking policies.

Exercise and fitness are also beneficial, and this is an area where activities can easily be utilized. Such activities may include fitness facilities on site, exercise breaks, subsidized exercise and fitness endeavors, exercise clubs, fitness testing, and employee sports leagues. Nutrition and weight control activities should also be an integral part of the wellness program. Such activities include weight loss classes, off-site weight loss program subsidies, incentives, and healthy food alternatives, particularly in cafeterias or vending machines.

Substance abuse awareness activities might include information about substance abuse programs and prohibition of the use of drugs or alcohol on site.

Safety activities which can easily be incorporated into a wellness program may include personal safety training, incentives for safe behavior, first aid and CPR training, and defensive driving courses.

Other worthwhile wellness activities of a more general nature include such things as awareness campaigns, provision of a healthy environment, support and participation of upper management in program activities, follow-up, consumer education programs, subsidized programs, and inclusion of family members in some or all of the programs.

Personal assessment programs are also helpful activities for the wellness program and include overall assessment of health and health-related areas such as heart disease risk,

cancer risk, dietary evaluation, fitness testing, and evaluation of stress.

### **HEALTH SCREENING PROGRAMS**

Health and medical screening programs are an essential component of a comprehensive wellness program, and they can range from the extensive and comprehensive to the basic elements of screening. Screening for high blood pressure is very easy to accomplish on site. Vision and hearing screening, including screening for glaucoma, can help employees maintain maximum function and productivity. Mammography and cancer screening, blood sugar screening to rule out the possibility of diabetes, and a basic blood chemical panel and urinalysis to detect early signs of disease may identify difficulties at an early and treatable stage.

### **RESOURCES**

It is important to recognize that business and industry have many resources available for the development, planning, and implementation of an employee wellness program. Aside from their own internal resources, they may turn to companies such as Coors Brewing Company, Hershey Food Corporation, 3-M Corporation, Kimberly-Clark, and numerous other industries nationally and internationally which have well recognized corporate wellness programs. Many of the non-profit health agencies are also useful resources for developing and implementing a wellness program. These include, but are not limited to, the American Cancer Society, the American Diabetes Association, the American Heart Association, the American Lung Association, the American Red Cross, and Alcoholics Anonymous. Community resources such as colleges and universities and state and local health departments may provide materials and speakers or consultants for development of a program. Local hospitals are often good resources through all stages of program development and implementation.

### **SUMMARY**

Employee health and safety are of concern, both to the employer and to the employee. The benefits of employee health and safety programs in terms of time, money, and productivity can be extremely substantial. Companies who currently engage in worksite health promotion/wellness programs are to be applauded. For those seeking to initiate a program, numerous resources exist and are readily available. Research consistently reports positive results from such programs.

## **USEFUL INTERNET SOURCES**

The American Medical Association (AMA),  
<http://www.ama-assn.org> American Public Health  
Association (APHA), <http://www.apha.org> Better Health,  
<http://www.Betterhealth.com> Centers for Disease Control  
and Prevention, <http://www.cdc.gov> Health Finder,  
<http://www.healthfinder.gov/default.htm> Health Touch,  
<http://www.healthtouch.com> The Mayo Health Oasis,  
<http://www.mayohealth.org> National Institutes of Health  
(NIH), <http://www.nih.gov> Reuter's Health Information, Inc.  
(RHI), <http://www.ReutersHealth.com>. Staywell,  
<http://www.staywell.com> Thrive,  
[www.http://thriveonline.com](http://www.thriveonline.com) The World Health  
Organization (WHO), <http://www.who.ch> Wellness Web,  
<http://www.wellweb.com>

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