

Economic cost of obesity a heavy burden on employers

The fact that there is an obesity epidemic in the United States is evident everywhere. A movie theatre seat has grown from an average of 19 inches to 23 inches wide, revolving doors from six feet to eight feet wide, and supermarket aisles have expanded from five feet to seven feet, not to accommodate overweight shoppers but for the bigger carts needed to transport soda, cup cakes, ice cream and hundreds of other snacks.

The impact on the workplace is profound, with obesity-related healthcare costs in the \$8 billion range, according to the American Journal of Health Promotion. Along with the loss in productivity resulting from an obese workforce—and research on the economic cost of obesity revealing 39 million lost work days per year, 239 million restricted-activity days, 90 million bed days, and 63 million physician visits—there comes another problem.

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), obesity and associated health conditions, particularly diabetes, are responsible for much of the increase in employee health care costs. Obese persons spend 77% more for necessary medications than non-obese persons. The CDC goes on to say that obesity also has a significant impact on worker productivity because the more chronic medical conditions an employee has, the higher the probability of absenteeism.

A report in the American Journal of Health Promotion points out that obese workers with diabetes are less productive on the job, and more susceptible to severe injury situations that result in higher insurance costs.

For example, I recall a recent case where an employee was bumped slightly in the leg by a laundry cart. For a healthy worker, this simple act wouldn't even raise a bruise. However, it aggravated this particular worker's diabetes condition, resulting in an award of permanent total benefits (lifetime medical and lost wages benefits), easily a multiple six-figure claim. A worker with diabetes runs the risk of any injury he incurs, even the slightest abrasion, potentially escalating into a serious injury, which could eventually lead to amputation.

To their credit, most employers are well aware that the best way to combat obesity-related diabetes in the workplace is to institute a wellness program. But often a roadblock to coming up with a plan is the employer tip-toeing around a possible solution because of fear of violating the Americans with Disabilities Act. No company wants to generate the perception that it is discriminating against overweight people. But by not being pro-active, they are putting their company and employees at risk.

One way to help overcome the problem is to offer voluntary programs and motivate employees to participate in them voluntarily. And



these programs don't have to put a strain on the company's bottom line.

In a struggling economy, cutbacks in the company budget often hit high cost areas, such as the onsite cafeteria with the healthy menu, and the gym with the cardiovascular equipment. Sadly, the vending machine filled with Pringles and Little Debbie snacks, a relatively inexpensive piece of equipment to maintain, stands like a beacon to every overweight worker who passes by. This is a classic example of being penny wise and dollar foolish. At the very least, take a closer look at what your vending machines offer, and make healthy changes.

Either way, a company doesn't need to invest \$100,000 in a state-of-the-art health facility to accomplish its healthy mission. There are a number of relatively inexpensive steps an employer can initiate to help employees stay healthy and avoid the risk of costly obesity-related diseases, such as diabetes.

Any program should start with upper management. Let employees see that management is fully committed to achieving a goal by leading lunchtime walks and other activities. I worked with a company where employees were prone to back and shoulder injuries. To help reduce these injuries, management began each day with stretching exercises, which reduced similar workplace injuries by 50% over the first year.

Some companies have even encouraged employees to forego elevators for stairs by making stairwells more attractive, painting the walls a bright color, increasing lighting and even piping in music.

You can also make programs like Weight Watchers available at work, and have experts from the local YMCA come in to discuss a healthier lifestyle. Create a team atmosphere and a level of friendly competition, with incentives for the "winners."

In an effort to help employers accomplish their mission, the CDC has instituted a program called LEAN (Leading Employees to Activity and Nutrition), a web-based resource designed for worksite obesity prevention and control programs. The website, cdc.gov/Leanworks, includes an obesity cost calculator to help employers estimate how much obesity, and resulting diabetes, is costing their company, and the potential savings from implementing a solid workplace wellness program.

By implementing such programs, an employer can reduce obesity in the workplace, and reduce the risk of diabetes. Along with the obvious monetary benefit, companies with a wellness plan in place will also see increased productivity, reduced absenteeism, better morale, less employee turnover, and the overall feeling by employees that management cares about their well-being.

This article is adapted from an article by Teresa A. Long, Director of Injury Management Strategies for the Institute of WorkComp Professionals that has appeared in several major trade publications. The material is provided as general information and is not a substitute for legal or other professional advice.



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