

Extra care for outwardly healthy workers costs companies millions annually

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Someone healthy enough to work could still cost an employer more than \$4,000 annually in unnecessary health care costs.

A new University of Michigan study shows workers with [metabolic syndrome](#) (MetS) and associated chronic disease can cost employers up to \$5,867 annually in health care, pharmacy and short term disability---compared to \$1,600 for a healthy worker. But the good news: Companies can stop those [chronic health problems](#) before they start.

MetS is a collection of health risks that includes body mass index, cholesterol, glucose, blood pressure and triglycerides. The study was designed to determine the relationship between MetS and disease among employed adults. Researchers at the Health Management Research Center in the U-M School of Kinesiology gave health risk assessments to 3,285 employees in a Midwestern manufacturing company in 2004, and again in 2006. They hoped to determine whether employees with MetS would develop one of five [chronic conditions](#) (heart disease, diabetes, chronic pain, heartburn, or arthritis) associated with MetS.

People in the general population with MetS are known to be more likely to develop health problems such as heart disease and diabetes without health intervention, says research associate and study author Alyssa Schultz, but this is the first time the link has been studied and shown in working populations.

This surprising finding challenges the so-called "healthy worker" effect.

Researchers found that the workers in the study were just as likely to develop heart disease and diabetes as the general population. This finding defies the prevailing wisdom that working people are healthier and more insulated from disease than the unemployed, says Schultz.

"We didn't know if employees with MetS would also have disease but they do," Schultz said. "This shows disease is an issue for corporations and other organizations, and they need to take action to help employees stay healthy.

"People with MetS cost employers money, but people with MetS and disease cost a lot more," Schultz said.

Employees with MetS were significantly more likely to report arthritis, chronic pain, diabetes, heartburn and [heart disease](#), Schultz says. Also, if someone had MetS in 2004, they were much more likely to develop one of the associated chronic conditions by the second test in 2006.

"The important thing for employers is to catch employees who have the risk factors before it escalates to a disease state," she said. "Keeping people healthy is much wiser than treating the illness or disease after it occurs."

The first step for employers says Schultz, is a health risk appraisal to determine the health of employees. When at-risk employees are identified, a prevention and intervention programs can cost as little as \$150 a year per employee, according to a source in the paper.

"If individuals take advantage of programs helping them to both maintain their low risks and reduce their high risks, their odds of experiencing disease will be reduced," she said. "This leads to improved vitality and quality of life for individuals, and cost avoidance for corporations in the form of lower health care, pharmacy and short term

disability costs.

Source: University of Michigan ([news](#) : [web](#))

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