

# Employer-sponsored wellness programs on the rise

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Organizations in the Chicago area report an increase of health-improvement and wellness programs according to a survey conducted in September 2011 by Aon Hewitt in partnership with Rush Health. The survey results will be released at the 9th annual Employer Symposium at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago on Thursday, March 22.

The symposium is sponsored by Rush [Health](#), not-for-profit organization whose members include Rush University Medical Center, Rush Oak Park Hospital and physicians on the medical staffs of these hospitals. Rush Health acts as a key representative to businesses, their employees and their insurers while developing and providing programs that help to continuously improve the quality of the care for patients.

"The wellness survey showed that employers target [lifestyle habits](#) to improve the health of employees," said Brent Estes, president and CEO, Rush Health. "Keeping people healthy isn't merely a booming trend; it's a necessary part of life. It's important to invest in the health of your employees by helping to identify the current health status and [health risks](#) of your workforce. It's an additional measure that employers can take to help employees remain healthy."

The findings of the survey showed that a number of Chicago-area employers tie incentives to health screening results and report [improved health](#) outcomes. The symposium at Rush will speak to the future of wellness and will focus on strategies and opportunities to improve [health outcomes](#) and challenges employers face as incentive-based wellness

programs are designed and implemented.

"The overall wellness and health of employees has been an increased focus for many employers," said Dr. Michael Cryer, national medical director with Aon Hewitt. "Implementing wellness initiatives has the potential to boost productivity and reduce indirect [medical costs](#). Incentives and wellness programs benefit all involved."

The survey was completed by 361 organizations representing a [broad spectrum](#) of industries in the Chicago health care marketplace. While wellness programs vary by organization, the activities identified included risk identification tools such as health risk assessments, questionnaires and screenings for blood-pressure and cholesterol; behavior modification programs that involved coaching, smoking cessation and weight management and nutrition programs; an increase in healthy work environment options that encourage group walking programs and a larger selection of healthy eating options; and program measurement result monitoring to identify participation levels, satisfaction, reductions in risk factors and changes in health behavior.

The organizations were asked to report the types of programs and services offered in 2011 as well as identify the programs that will be offered in 2012. While employers will continue to offer [health improvement](#) programs, some reported a decrease in sponsorship of some programs that include health risk assessments and wellness education fairs. Other organizations showed an increase in sponsorship to include physical fitness walking programs, disease management and behavior change programs that reimburse employees for participation.

A total of 81 percent of employers target lifestyle habits that focus on physical activity, tobacco use and weight management programs. Of the organizations that focus programs on specific conditions, diabetes was most popular at 72 percent; followed by high blood pressure, heart

disease and obesity. Only 5 percent of employers were found to not target at least one lifestyle habit versus 19 percent of employers who do not target any specific health conditions.

The survey also found that employers have begun to reward participants for following up with primary care physicians to address screening results. Two out of five employers offer incentives for participation and completion of lifestyle modification programs such as weight loss or quitting smoking.

The survey showed that more employers are interested in engaging employees in healthier behaviors by encouraging healthier lifestyle habits.

While many employers offer wellness programs and incentives, many were not tracking the screening results. Employers that tracked results reported measurable improved results in blood pressure, cholesterol level, blood sugar and body mass index.

Because healthy lifestyle behavior change is linked with chronic health conditions, employer wellness program investments are growing. Based on themes emerging from the survey results, employers can improve health and wellness programs significantly by incorporating specific wellness strategies that incorporate incentives and programs to encourage healthy behaviors while monitoring the effectiveness of wellness programs.

Provided by Rush University Medical Center

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