Obese employees cost employers thousands in extra medical costs

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A new study in the *American Journal of Health Promotion* finds that, on average, a morbidly obese employee costs an employer over $4,000 more per year in health care and related costs than an employee who is of normal weight.

The study also revealed that obese individuals who had comorbidities such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and high cholesterol incurred more costs than obese workers without these conditions, says Karen Van Nuys, Ph.D., lead coauthor and economist at Precision Health Economics in Los Angeles.

"For example, someone who is overweight or obese and also has diabetes

is more likely to file a short-term disability claim compared to someone who doesn't have diabetes but is overweight or obese."

The study analyzed data from nearly 30,000, mostly male employees over a three-year period and included self-reported employee health information, medical visits and prescription claims, and employer-reported data on absenteeism, short-term disability and workers compensation claims.

Compared with an employee with a body mass index of 25, an employee with a BMI of 35, which is considered obese, has nearly double the risk of filing a short-term disability claim or a workers' compensation claim. Normal weight employees cost an average of $3,830 per year in covered medical claims, sick days, short-term disability and [workers compensation](link) while a [morbidly obese](link) person costs employers more than double that at $8,067.

"Overweight/obesity are just one of several modifiable risk factors in the workplace—but ones that are most problematic right now because they're getting worse by the minute," commented Ron Goetzel, Ph.D. of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and Truven Health Analytics. Goetzel was not associated with the study.

Van Nuys and Goetzel cautioned that the results of this study and others like it should not be used to discriminate against overweight and obese employees. "There are all kinds of reasons why that response makes no sense at all, besides being potentially illegal, unethical, and impractical," says Goetzel. Given that two-thirds of all Americans are overweight or obese, such a tactic would significantly diminish the pool of qualified employees.

Goetzel explained that employers need to invest in robust, comprehensive [health promotion](link) programs for their employees that

include physical activity, healthy eating, stress and depression management, and control of blood pressure and diabetes. "If you do those in combination and you do them right, not only is [this type of intervention] cost effective, in some cases it is cost beneficial, so that there is potentially even a return on investment here for employers."

More information: Van Nuys K, Globe D, Ng-Mak D, et al. "The association between employee obesity and employer costs: evidence from a panel of U.S. employers." *Am J Health Promotion.* 2014; 28(5):277-285.

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