

More employers look to boost employee health and well-being

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Credit: American Heart Association

With so much time spent at work, the office seems a logical place to encourage a healthy lifestyle.

A growing number of American employers are doing exactly that through [workplace health](#) programs. Their aim: to improve employee health and productivity and reduce absenteeism due to illness and chronic disease while possibly lowering [health care costs](#).

For employees, these programs can mean a more enjoyable lifestyle and more job satisfaction.

"The workplace is a really important setting for promoting health, particularly cardiovascular health," said Dr. Gregg Fonarow, the Eliot Corday Professor of Cardiovascular Medicine and Science at UCLA. "There's a real potential to improve the health and well-being of employees."

Those who work full time spend on average more than one-third of their day, five days a week, at work. Workplace wellness programs could potentially reach more than 159 million workers nationwide, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

A wide range of programs

What do these health and wellness programs look like? They vary in size and scope.

Many companies offer direct benefits to workers, such as access to gyms, exercise equipment, healthy foods at the office or nutrition counseling.

Others give financial incentives for participation in weight loss or smoking cessation plans. Some companies even design buildings to encourage physical activity such as taking the stairs instead of elevators.

Workplace wellness programs began to take hold about 20 years ago, often with a one-size-fits-all approach. Now, more programs are targeted and personalized with metrics to measure results, Fonarow said.

The Kaiser Family Foundation's 2017 Employer Health Benefits Survey found about one-fifth of small firms and half of large firms that offer

health benefits offer employees an opportunity for a biometric screening.

It's important to create a comprehensive program using "science-based best practices," said Fonarow, who chairs the American Heart Association's workplace health recognition committee.

Cardiovascular health is key

In 2015, the AHA issued recommendations on effective workplace wellness programs developed by a panel of experts and published in the journal *Circulation*. They stated that workplace wellness programs often are not comprehensive, that they range in quality, and that they would be stronger if they included criteria to measure cardiovascular fitness, which affects many other aspects of health.

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States, and stroke is the fifth-leading cause of death. Workplace wellness programs have the potential to prevent many of these deaths, the authors said.

Their recommendations are meant to serve as a blueprint for employers in designing a workplace health and wellness program.

The panel highlighted the AHA's Life's Simple 7, a set of measurements that provide specific steps toward preventing heart disease.

The seven steps are:

1. Quitting smoking.
2. Getting physically active.
3. Losing weight.
4. Eating better.
5. Managing blood pressure.

6. Controlling cholesterol.
7. Reducing blood sugar.

Life's Simple 7 can be measured using the online tool My Life Check. Better scores can result in less [heart disease](#) and stroke and other diseases such as cancer. With improved health comes the possibility of enjoying a longer career.

Leading the way

It helps to create "a culture of health" at a workplace, where employees at all levels participate, Fonarow said.

What isn't as effective? Outsourcing a health program when there is no change of culture within the company or when it's perceived that a company's leadership is not engaged, he said.

The AHA's CEO Roundtable brings together corporate leaders nationwide who have pledged to serve as role models for healthy living and to disseminate evidence-based approaches to workplace health. The CEOs create strategies to enable a healthy, high-performing workforce. The Roundtable's efforts are designed to ultimately drive business growth and transform health in companies and communities.

Nearly 1,000 employers participated in the AHA's workplace health achievement index last year. Fonarow said he looks forward to growing the effort and attracting the "hundreds of thousands of companies out there."

Getting employees to participate in workplace wellness programs when they are offered is also part of the challenge. Employers must work to overcome barriers such as health literacy—how well a person can obtain and understand health information—while also focusing on appropriate

incentives for high-risk employees, Fonarow said.

As workplace health programs continue to evolve, so too does the data studying their effectiveness.

More study is needed in this area. To realize the full potential of such programs, the AHA expert panel's research indicated it was important for employers to design and implement them well.

Provided by American Heart Association

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