

# Low cost, easy-to-adopt programs can improve employee health

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Small businesses are prepared to adopt workplace wellness programs and, based on the kinds of health risks facing employees, are a good target for such health interventions according to new research published in this month's issue of the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* from the Colorado School of Public Health.

This research was part of a large prospective, longitudinal case-control study to determine whether worker productivity improves and workers' compensation costs fall if [health](#) promotion programs are offered to [small businesses](#).

Nearly 80 percent of large employers offer [wellness programs](#), but less than one-third of small businesses engage in these programs, according to past research. The article, "Implementation of a Worksite Wellness Program Targeting Small Businesses: The Pinnacol Assurance Health Risk Management Study" from researchers at the Colorado School of Public Health is the first field-based study to look at implementing low-cost worksite wellness programs in a large number of small businesses.

"Small businesses face significant barriers of when considering worksite wellness programs because they lack the money, time and knowledge about how to implement them," said the study's lead author, Lee Newman, MD, MA, professor of environmental and occupational health at the Colorado School of Public Health at the CU Anschutz Medical Campus. "We demonstrated that Colorado small businesses will adopt worksite wellness programs, if the program is provided free of charge

and comes with advice on how to execute it," he continued. "This study provides important on-the-ground insight into how to structure these programs."

Between 2010 and 2014, Pinnacol Assurance, Colorado's leading provider of workers' compensation insurance, conducted a first of its kind study to determine if worksite wellness could improve the health and productivity of Colorado employees, as well as workers' compensation outcomes.

As part of the four-year study, Pinnacol offered a free health [risk management](#) program and implementation assistance to its policyholders. The wellness program was a health risk management program, which first offered workers an online questionnaire to assess their [health risks](#) and then provided feedback in the form of a letter that offered suggestions for health improvement. Employees could also choose to talk to a health coach via telephone and use online educational resources.

Of the 260 small businesses that participated in the program, 6,507 employees, or 47.9 percent of eligible employees, took the health risk assessment. Survey results showed that one-third (34.3 percent) of participants were overweight and one quarter (25.6 percent) were obese. One-fifth, or 22 percent of workers, reported depression, and 20.4 percent of workers faced chronic fatigue.

"Pinnacol insures 40,000 small businesses in Colorado and knowing that they are open to wellness programs helps us as we look at new and innovative ways to serve and bring enhanced value to them," said Karyn Gonzales, Pinnacol's vice president of medical operations and healthcare strategy. "The study has generated robust data indicating that worksite wellness programs have the potential to improve the health of participants. Study data also linked health risk factors to the frequency and cost of workplace injuries and demonstrated a medical and

productivity savings of \$2.03 for every \$1.00 invested in our worksite wellness program."

"For small business owners, the takeaway is, there's much I can be doing at my company to promote better health," said Newman. "There's a high rate of preventable health conditions in the workplace, and business owners can make a difference."

**More information:** "Implementation of a Worksite Wellness Program Targeting Small Businesses: The Pinnacol Assurance Health Risk Management Study." *Journal of Occupational & Environmental Medicine*: [DOI: 10.1097/JOM.0000000000000279](https://doi.org/10.1097/JOM.0000000000000279)

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