

# The ABCs of Wellness Programs



BY SCOTT GOLDSTEIN



Some companies are paying bonuses to employees for attending smoking cessation classes or weight-loss seminars. Other firms are covering the cost of medical tests for employees to detect red flags like high blood pressure, triglycerides or cholesterol, and are even providing suggestions to lower them.

from getting ill than to take care of them after they are ill,” said Frank Pileggi, director of Lourdes Corporate Wellness Programs.

About 50 percent to 70 percent of all health problems are associated with a modifiable health risk – which means they are preventable, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And more than half of the small and large firms that offered employee health benefits also offered some form of a wellness program, according to the Kaiser Foundation’s Employer Health Benefits 2008 Annual Survey.

There are many ways to institute a wellness program.

Some companies hire health systems like Lourdes to bring screeners to their offices and conduct “health fairs” where employees can voluntarily have blood pressure and glucose screenings. “If we see their cholesterol is high, we can put them on a nutrition plan. People can get a baseline and be aware of where they can be coached,” Pileggi said. “For those with a high body mass index, we recommend a monthly workshop the participant can attend to get tips on exercising at their desk and how to do cardio exercises.”

These are forms of corporate wellness programs designed to keep workers healthy, and contain both office absenteeism and the skyrocketing cost of health care insurance.

Interest in these programs is growing, said Maria Beltramello, head of strategy and product management for eHealth and wellness at Aetna, which provides wellness programs to its employees and to employees of many of its corporate customers. “The programs are designed to create awareness and get employees more involved in how they can achieve optimal health,” she said. “The more people you keep healthy, the less progression to chronic disease, the less the costs.”

The escalating cost of health insurance is one of the major reasons companies are taking a strong interest in their employees’ health, the experts say. “It’s cheaper to prevent people



FRANK PILEGGI

Workers go through the health fair's individual kiosks, which, in addition to the screenings, include chair messages, instructions for yoga-at-your-desk to help control stress levels, and information on smoking cessation classes.

Many health insurers also offer programs to their customers. Aetna provides various wellness programs, including a health assessment survey that asks employees about smoking, exercise, nutrition and more. Once an employee completes the survey, they are given a report that outlines controllable risks and recommends online wellness programs to address them, Beltramello said. "These programs address topics such as weight, smoking, nutrition, stress and more," she said.

Aetna offers the program internally for its employees. The company gives its workers \$50 for filling out the health assessment, and an additional \$50 for each wellness program they complete. The employees can earn up to \$600 per year, and so can their family members.

"We provide cash incentives," Beltramello said. "Some companies give

gift cards, contributions to employees' health savings accounts or reductions in the amount employees contribute to their health insurance premiums."

There are legal issues to think about before instituting a corporate wellness program, said Susan Nardone, director of the employment practice group at the Newark-based law firm Gibbons P.C.

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) prohibits employers from discriminating against employees when offering health benefits. For this reason, Nardone recommends that companies don't require employees to participate in wellness programs, nor should they offer a rebate on health insurance premiums as a condition to reaching specific goals, like quitting smoking or reducing cholesterol. Instead, she suggests companies reimburse employees for the cost of good health initiatives, like gym membership and nutrition classes.

Further, rewards must be offered to all employees and designed to promote health. "It can't be anything that employers happen to think is a

good idea," Nardone said. "It has to be achievable. If an employee can't get cholesterol under 200 because it is medically inadvisable or impossible due to a condition, there has to be a reasonable alternative."

Some employees see wellness programs as an invasion of privacy.

"Occasionally that comes up," said Beltramello, of Aetna. "It used to be more prevalent a year or two ago." Some people are concerned that their health insurance premiums could increase based on findings from a wellness program, she said. "That is just not the case," Beltramello insisted. Information is only provided to employers in the aggregate. Individual information is never shared."

Pileggi, of Lourdes Corporate Wellness Programs, said employees actually appreciate wellness programs. "It gives them a feeling of support and general compassion," he said. "It shows the company actually cares about how they are feeling." ❖

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*Scott Goldstein is the communications manager for the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce.*

## PAYING EMPLOYEES TO BE HEALTHY

BY MICHAEL MCGUIRE



Americans are increasingly unhealthy, and the cost of treating them has reached unsustainable heights. Even before the national debate on health care reform, many companies were stepping up and doing something about it by offering incentives to employees for living healthy.

Companies large and small have instituted wellness programs that, in some cases, pay for employees' gym dues, smoking cessation classes, nutrition awareness programs and medical tests that can lead to early detection of disease. In some cases, companies pay bonuses to workers who complete these programs. This plays a direct role in keeping workers healthy and cutting health care costs.

Much of the nation's health care spending goes toward treating preventable diseases. The signs are all around us: The failure to eat right and exercise, smoking and skipping routine doctor's visits. It can all lead to obesity, diabetes, heart disease and other conditions that are expensive to treat.

Here's the bottom line: between 50 percent and 70 percent of all health problems are associated with a modifiable

health risk – which means they are preventable, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

UnitedHealthcare, one of the nation's largest health insurers, works with employers and their employees to promote wellness programs. The NIA Group, a Paramus-based insurance broker, recently implemented UnitedHealthcare's wellness program called SimplyEngaged.

Employees who participate in the SimplyEngaged program receive \$75 for completing a health assessment online or over the phone. Then, based on the results of the assessment, they are given recommendations for improving their health. Those who take advantage of tools like online or telephone health coaching receive an additional \$25.

The NIA Group sees SimplyEngaged as an effective way to increase the health awareness of its workers and help them be more proactive when managing their health. By promoting employee wellness, The NIA Group saw a decrease in workplace absenteeism, an increase in productivity and lower overall health care costs.

If employers continue to support employee wellness, the benefits will extend far beyond the workplace. ❖

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*Michael McGuire is CEO of the health insurer UnitedHealthcare of New Jersey.*