



**NEWSLETTER**

**DECEMBER 2009 – ISSUE 16**

## ***OBESITY – LEADING THE CHARGE FOR HEALTH PROMOTION BY ORGANIZATIONS***

According to experts in the field of health, obesity had reached epidemic proportions in North America. As most of us are aware, obesity not only can result in increased cases of heart disease, diabetes, and other common physical ailments, but it has also been determined to be a risk for psychiatric disorders and certain types of cancers. Obese and overweight individuals are likely to end up costing the health care system and employers more than normal-weight persons. In addition, people suffering from obesity or from a chronic disease are also more likely to be absent from work due to ill-health. Finally, other social costs, such as underachievement in school and discrimination at work, must also be taken into account.

Michael D. Myers defines obesity as "... an excess of body fat that frequently results in a significant impairment of health. Obesity results when the size or number of fat cells in a person's body increases. A normal-sized person has between 30 and 35 billion fat cells. When a person gains weight, these fat cells first increase in size and later in number. "

In 2009, Statistics Canada reported that in 2005, more than two million employed Canadians age 18 to 64 were obese. Based on self-assessed weight and height, the obesity rate among workers has steadily increased, especially for men.<sup>1</sup> In 2004, nearly seven million Canadians were overweight, and another 4.5 million were obese.

According to several studies, unhealthy workers due to obesity are much more likely to have greater absenteeism and presenteeism than healthy workers. They are also generally going to be less productive. As a result, organizations now have increased their interest in promoting a healthier workforce in a number of different ways.

In 2003, the Washington Business Group on Health (WBGH) estimated that the obesity epidemic costs organizations in the U.S. more than \$12 billion annually. The WBGH subsequently launched the [Institute on the Costs and Health Effects of Obesity](#) to help corporate America reduce the impact of obesity and weight-related conditions in the workplace. The Institute, which includes some of the world's leading corporations and federal health agencies, explores the epidemic of obesity, proposes solutions and strategies, and serves as a catalyst for change.<sup>2</sup>

The general issue of obesity has also risen to the extent that a public-private consortium made up of six European countries recently launched the *FOOD programme*. The programme is aimed at promoting access to healthy food choices by adapting both *what restaurants serve (the offer)* and *what employees want (the demand)*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Obesity on the Job - 2005*, Jungwee Park, Statistics Canada, February 2009 Perspectives, Catalogue no. 75-001-X

<sup>2</sup> *Employers Plan Obesity Fight, Citing \$12 Billion-a-Year Cost*. Milt Freudenheim, June 18, 2003 New York Times

<sup>3</sup> *Influencing eating habits at work*: ENWHP-Newsletter, November 2009

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## Why are organizations more interested in health promotion today than ever?

*In addition to detrimentally affecting the health and well being of the current and future U.S. workforce, this nation's increasing obesity epidemic poses serious cost-related challenges to large employers. Employer-sponsored health care reaches 2 out of every 3 Americans and the direct costs employers assume to provide this care are skyrocketing. Between the Spring of 2001 and the Spring of 2002, monthly premiums for employer-sponsored health insurance rose 12.7% and employers are likely to continue to see double-digit increases for the next few years.*<sup>4</sup>

There are both direct and indirect costs to organizations as a result of obesity in the workplace. Direct costs include the fact that obese employees tend to be absent from work due to illness substantially more often than their lean counterparts. Where organizations provide health benefits, indirect costs include increased health care costs and utilization.

According to the [National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health](#) (NIOSH), there is growing evidence that obesity may also increase the risk of some occupational diseases, including musculoskeletal disorders, asthma, and vibration-induced injury. In addition, obesity may alter the way the body responds to potentially neurotoxic chemicals, and to challenges to the immune system.

Studies in the U.S. have also shown that overweight workers cost their bosses more in injury claims than their lean colleagues. One such study found the heaviest employees had twice the rate of workers' compensation claims as their fit co-workers.<sup>5</sup> When Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina scrutinized medical costs and claims data for its obese members, it discovered that their care cost at least 30 percent more than normal-weight members.<sup>6</sup>

As a 2009 Statistics Canada study points out, obesity becomes more than just a personal health issue when it begins to affect job performance. The odds of being absent from work were almost four times higher for obese young men aged 18 to 34 than for those with normal weight, after controlling for socioeconomic and health-related factors. Obesity was also related to reduced work activities, more disability days, and higher rates of work injury for women aged 35 to 54.<sup>7</sup>

## What are organizations doing to promote health among their employees?

Two approaches appear to have evolved concerning obesity in the workplace. At one extreme end of the spectrum, employers have begun to equate obesity with disabilities and with general fitness. In the U.S., increasing concerns over the rising costs associated with employee health benefits has led to some companies rejecting job applicants on the basis of their fitness. Since some would argue that obesity is a condition and not a disability, this issue may increasingly play out in terms of recruitment and retention policies. Canadian organizations are not immune to such thinking. Indeed, where two qualified candidates are available and one is obese by definition, the advantage may go to the non-obese candidate in light of research done on related absenteeism and productivity concerns.

It should be pointed out that, although there is no legislation specifically forbidding discrimination on the grounds of weight as there is in some U.S. states, Canadian employers could find themselves in trouble if the weight gain is caused by a long-term medical impairment which substantially affects a person's ability to carry out day-to-day tasks. For example, under the terms of the *Disability Discrimination Act* in

<sup>4</sup> *The Epidemic of Obesity: Costs to Employers and Practical Solutions*: Miriam Jacobson, M.S. Ed, Washington Business Group on Health, December 2002

<sup>5</sup> Fat workers cost more in injury claims, lost work than their fit colleagues: Carla K. Johnson, Canadian Press, Apr. 24, 2007

<sup>6</sup> *Swallowing the Cost of Obesity Treatment*. Charlotte Huff: *Workforce Management*, January 2005, pp. 47-51

<sup>7</sup> *Study: Obesity on the job – 2005*: The Daily, StatsCan, February 20, 2009

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the U.S., long-term is defined as having lasted for 12 months or being likely to last for a year or the rest of the person's life. In one U.S. study of nearly 3,000 people, obese respondents were 37 times more likely than normal-weight to report employment discrimination - not being hired for a job, not getting promoted and wrongful termination. Obese employees are considered less conscientious, "less agreeable" and less emotionally stable than "normal weight" workers.<sup>8</sup>

For injury to feelings, there is no upper limit for which the compensation tribunals may award for disability discrimination and compensation. However, as long as the matter of fitness is a "bona fide" employment requirement, as in the case of firefighters, police officers and foot soldiers, Canadian employers can avoid discrimination charges based solely on obesity. The [Canadian Human Rights Commission](#) has looked at the issue of whether obesity constitutes a disability within the meaning of certain provisions of Canadian laws (e.g. *Canada Transportation Act*). Moreover, employers will have to be very careful during recruitment, promotion and other employment processes to avoid the perception of bias based on a person's physical appearance or level of general fitness unless there is a "bona fide" employment requirement.

### **How are employees generally reacting to health promotion activities by their organizations?**

For existing employees, organizations are increasingly implementing various health promotion activities to deal with everything from substance abuse and smoking to obesity and general fitness. Promotion activities aimed at employee weight issues include access to fitness facilities, weight-loss counselling and monitoring, and on-site healthy nutrition alternatives. The vast majority of activities are voluntary in nature, although some may include incentive programs. According to a 2007 study by the non-profit research organization RTI International of North Carolina, giving money to overweight workers can be a good incentive for them to drop those extra pounds, as well as being cost effective for companies. Researchers found that people paid to trim down lost more weight than overweight employees who had not been given a financial boost to get fit. The researchers also noted that the beauty of incentive based strategies is that they're essentially costless. Moreover, if nobody changes behavior, you don't pay anybody money.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, another study published in 2009 by the U.S. National Bureau of Economic Research, found that financial incentives had very little effect. Nevertheless, one of the study's authors, John Cawley, an economist at Cornell, said that while money was ineffective in certain cases, there is surely some amount of money that would persuade most people to lose weight. However, no one knows what that amount is.<sup>10</sup>

*Employees want help losing weight and staying healthy, and employers appear to be willing to step up. A national survey on workplace attitudes toward obesity reveals common ground. For example, 80 percent of employees and 71 percent of companies believe the workplace is an appropriate setting for responding to weight management, according to the STOP Obesity Alliance and the National Opinion Research Center.<sup>11</sup>*

Of course, the first step is to ensure that employees recognize that they have a weight problem. Surveys have highlighted a yawning gap between perception and reality. It has been shown that a good percentage of overweight persons describe their weight as being "just right." For this reason, an initial voluntary and impartial assessment is critical to providing the individual with sufficient health data to form the basis for a decision as to whether or not to take part in health promotion activities. Forcing

<sup>8</sup> *Bias against obese people increasing, study says:* Sharon Kirkey, Canwest News Service, May 19, 2009

<sup>9</sup> *Paying employees to lose weight works - Study:* Reuters Wednesday, September 12, 2007

<sup>10</sup> *Behavior: Money Not a Motivator in Losing Weight:* Nicholas Bakalar, New York Times, July 7, 2009

<sup>11</sup> *Workers, Companies Share Obesity Concerns:* Garry Kranz, Workforce Management Week, July 13 - 19, 2008, Vol. 9 Issue 28

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one's participation will most likely be counterproductive and could lead to charges by affected employees of harassment or discriminatory practices. Obtaining the support of fellow workers and family members can often help to motivate persons with known weight-related concerns.

**It is important that organizations involve their employees in the planning of any health promotion initiatives well before the programs are put into place.**

### **What are the benefits to organizations of active health promotion activities?**

As part of overall wellness programs, health promotion will help organizations to become healthier and their employees to become more productive. By assisting employees with weight loss and improved general fitness, direct health care and disability costs will be lowered, and in turn their associated employer premiums. Studies have shown that absenteeism due to illness and injury will be reduced.

The link between obesity and health problems is becoming clearer. Employers, workers' compensation boards and disability insurance providers are increasingly assessing the impact that the rising prevalence of obesity is having on workers' comp claims, disability insurance claims and health and safety efforts.

Where effective weight-loss programs have been implemented in the workplace, both employers and employees have benefited. A 2008 report by the U.S. Conference Board concluded that more than 40 percent of U.S. companies had obesity reduction or wellness programs, and an additional 24 percent planned to start such programs. The report went on to note that such programs can yield a return on investment ranging from zero to as much as \$5 for each \$1 invested.<sup>12</sup>

#### **Recommended Reading:**

- ☞ [The Epidemic of Obesity: Costs to Employers and Practical Solutions](#), Miriam Jacobson, M.S. Ed, Washington Business Group on Health, December 2002
- ☞ [Obesity on the Job - 2005](#), Jungwee Park, Statistics Canada, February 2009 Perspectives, Catalogue no. 75-001-X
- ☞ "Work, Obesity, and Occupational Safety and Health," American Journal of Public Health March 2007: [www.ajph.org/cgi/content/full/97/3/428](http://www.ajph.org/cgi/content/full/97/3/428)
- ☞ "Aetna's Exercise in Obesity Treatment", *Workforce Management Online*, January 2005: <http://www.workforce.com/archive/article/23/92/03.php>
- ☞ [The Practical Guide: Identification, Evaluation and Treatment of Overweight and Obesity in Adults](#), National Institutes of Health, October 2000

#### **Recommended Web Sites:**

- ◆ European *FOOD Programme* - European Network for Workplace Health Promotion: <http://www.food-programme.eu/en/>
- ◆ Institute on The Costs and Health Effects of Obesity - Washington Business Group on Health: <http://www.businessgrouphealth.org/eNewsletter/index.cfm>
- ◆ The Obesity Society: <http://www.obesity.org/index.htm>

<sup>12</sup> *Obesity More Costly To U.S. Companies Than Smoking, Alcoholism*: Workforce Management Week, April 13 - 19, 2008, Vol. 9 Issue 16