



THE CHALLENGE OF OBESITY

CHECKLIST FOR WORKPLACE STRATEGIES



HEALTH
Advocate[™]

ABOUT THIS CHECKLIST

This publication offers important steps to initiating a wellness program that addresses obesity as a way to control obesity-related healthcare costs. It is important that weight management strategies are included within a context of a comprehensive wellness program that encourages all employees to be healthy. Whether your investment is offering healthier vending machine snacks, fitness opportunities, seminars or a fully-equipped gym, the key to enlisting and maximizing participation in weight loss efforts rests on specific elements. Following this checklist can help reduce the effect of obesity and obesity-related conditions on healthcare costs.

Health Advocate, Inc., the nation's leading healthcare advocacy and assistance company, provides a spectrum of time- and money-saving solutions to millions of Americans through its extensive employer and other plan sponsor relationships. Our core advocacy program is centered around a team of Personal Health Advocates (PHAs), typically registered nurses supported by medical directors and benefits specialists. PHAs help members navigate the healthcare system and resolve clinical, insurance and administrative issues. Our complementary solutions, offered for an additional charge, include Wellness Advocate, a comprehensive program that features a personal wellness coach supported by online wellness tools; Enrollment Advocate; FMLA Support and Independent Appeals Administration. Health Proponent is the consumer version of Health Advocate and is sold directly to individuals and their families.

Founded in 2001, the company is headquartered in suburban Philadelphia with sales offices in major cities.

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he doubling rate of obesity over the past 20 years accounts for almost 30% of the rise in healthcare spending, and businesses spend an estimated \$13 billion in medical costs and lost productivity related to obesity each year. Controlling costs involves carefully planned wellness strategies that include weight loss components. Even a modest weight loss of 5-15 percent of body weight can have a positive impact to help reduce disability, absenteeism and lost productivity.

Singling out overweight and obese workers for weight loss programs, however, can be discriminatory and stigmatizing. The key is to make weight loss a part of an overall wellness program aimed at all employees. The program should address the underlying factors that can contribute to obesity including dietary choices, physical activity and stress.

The challenge is to enlist employees to participate and make significant lifestyle changes for long-lasting weight loss and optimum health.

According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), approximately 86 percent of U.S. employers surveyed in 2007 offer a wellness program. If your workplace already has a wellness team, it may be prudent to revisit the program to evaluate the need to address obesity issues.

For first-time wellness planning, the initial step is to enlist employees from all levels of your organization to oversee the planning and implementation of your wellness/obesity program. Team members can help encourage employee buy-in, serve as ambassadors to the program, and represent the needs of those in their respective departments.

Enlist employee feedback. Company-wide employee surveys can help determine if employees are aware of lifestyle changes they need to make for better health, if they are prepared to take action, and to determine what activities would interest them enough to participate.



*Build a
Wellness Team*

*Tailor Activities
to Needs*



Set Realistic Goals

Develop a “Culture of Health”

Offering a walking program at lunchtime, for instance, may be impractical if employees are really not interested in walking during their lunch break.

Health Risk Assessments (HRAs). HRAs are confidential questionnaires in print or online formats that summarize an employee’s risks for major diseases based on their medical history and lifestyle habits such as diet and exercise. Summaries often include contributing factors such as excess weight. Once an employee is aware of the link between their weight and risk for diabetes, for instance, it may help motivate them to take action to reduce their weight. Aggregate data from HRAs also provide a profile of the overall workplace health status for targeted planning.

Biometric screenings. Biometric testing generally involves obtaining body measurements, including height, weight, blood pressure and percentage of body weight that is fat. Often employees are unaware that their weight has reached an unhealthy level and discovering it may spur them to join weight-loss activities.

Aim for 10 percent weight loss. This percentage is a reasonable goal and considered a success for obese individuals, who, by definition are 30-40 pounds overweight. However, if an employee or employees cannot lose weight despite their efforts, it is important to emphasize that no matter what their weight, the goal is to participate in activities—exercise, stopping smoking, etc.—that boost their overall health.

Make a long-term commitment. For an obese person, losing even 10 percent of weight requires a significant lifestyle change and, correspondingly, a significant amount of time. Organizations need to make a long-term, ongoing commitment to wellness programs.

Build in measurements. Determine how and when outcomes—such as the percentage of employees who experienced weight loss—will be measured. Methods may include weigh-ins or self-reporting.

Provide a variety of options. Weight management classes, an onsite Weight Watchers program, membership to gyms and walking clubs can all be useful tools in the fight against obesity. The more choices employees have available to them to join healthy activities, the better the participation rates.

Enlist senior management support and participation. It is valuable for employees to see their leaders out walking, selecting healthy choices in the cafeteria and being spotlighted for their successes. This is especially important if the leaders are overweight.

Make healthy choices easy. Stock the vending machines with low-fat snacks and switch from soda to water bottles, for instance. Serve low-fat, nutritious choices with reasonable serving sizes in cafeterias and post nutritional information including calorie counts nearby the food.

Partner with the Community

Offer healthy snacks at meetings. Yogurt, fruit or popcorn are good choices. Nuts are a good source of protein for sustained energy and are a leading source of monosaturated oils which may help reduce abdominal fat and possibly lower the risk for cardiovascular disease and other diseases.

Emphasize the importance of family wellness. Twenty-five million children and adolescents in the U.S. are obese. Whenever possible, make wellness activities such as walk-a-thons, company wellness activities like participation on volleyball teams or participation at fitness centers open to family members. Providing healthy recipes that employees can take home can be a helpful strategy, too.

Lengthen the lunch time. Emphasize that the extension can allow more time to walk or use the gym, for instance.

Hold half-hour activity breaks. Thirty minutes twice weekly for physical activity could help employees lose weight and also reap other health benefits such as lowered blood pressure.

Institute casual dress days. Regularly wearing clothes that allow easy body movement—switching from heels to flats, for instance—can help encourage movement around the office and even help burn calories.

Encourage movement throughout the day. Simple reminders to take the stairs, park further from the door and walk down the hallway instead of emailing can help instill the movement habit.

Discourage eating at desks. Meals eaten at the desk are often eaten in a rush and tend to contain high calories and few nutrients. Creating alternative eating areas can help encourage “mindful eating,” defined as focusing attention on the food being consumed, which can be a powerful way to manage appetite and calorie consumption.

Designate a stress management room. Stress has been shown to unlock the body’s fat cells and affect metabolism, which can lead to added weight. Allowing employees an opportunity to recharge—whether it’s time to sit in a quiet room or attend an onsite yoga class—is an important component of a wellness program.

Check out state and local initiatives. Many local and state governments and public agencies offer wellness toolkits and even grants for starting worksite weight reduction programs. Hospitals, non-profit recreational groups and other healthcare institutions are often eager to forge partnerships and assist with finding health and wellness programs. Likewise, free clinics or public health departments may be available to organize and administer Health Risk Assessments onsite.

Announce community wellness events. Post sign-up sheets about upcoming community events such as the American Heart Association’s Heart Walk or other activities that encourage physical activity and that raise awareness of specific health conditions.

Communicate Effectively



Reward Employees

Celebrate Group Successes

Invite experts to your workplace. Local speakers can present topics on nutrition and exercise or an instructor from a local gym can teach a fitness class. Holding an onsite health fair is good way to get employees' buy-in to participate in wellness activities.

Make communications ongoing and targeted to your workforce. Use employee newsletters, intranet sites, posters, flyers and meetings to encourage all employees to be healthy. Be cautious not to overemphasize—or stigmatize—employees who are obese.

Provide the facts. Post a chart listing the calories burned from common activities such as walking or biking. Or, post a list showing the calorie or fat content of vending machine food. Learning that eating a single candy bar daily can put on 26 pounds a year, for instance, may motivate employees to make healthier selections.

Encourage talking it up. Social reinforcement can be a powerful factor in behavior change. Encourage employees who participate in wellness programs to talk about the benefits they have gained from the program.

Emphasize the value of the program. Share any aggregate statistics you can gather—from lower medical costs and increased physical activity to pounds lost and BMI reductions.

Be creative with incentives. Options for rewarding pounds lost can include: T-shirts, modest cash awards, reduced fees at fitness centers, personal wellness coaches, paid days off, praise in the company newsletter and even an all-expense paid getaway.

Make sure your incentive program is compliant. The Department of Labor has issued specific nondiscrimination rules for employers to follow. *[For more information on these rules, see Health Advocate's Obesity in America: Workplace Solutions White Paper].*

Offer wellness programs during work hours. This is one of the most effective ways to increase participation, even among less motivated employees.

Announce it company-wide. Highlight the fact that the group lost 1,000 pounds during the last quarter, for instance. Or, if there is a walking group, have them track their miles and celebrate when the team has walked 5,000 miles.

Tally and announce company-wide totals. This number should reflect the number of people participating in the different programs and their totals. Update their progress throughout the year.

Provide celebration activities. For example, host an “achievement party”—with healthy food choices—to recognize participation and results. Better yet, find ways to celebrate without food such as issuing tickets to the home-town team's baseball game.



“Maximizing participation rests on a communications campaign that is far-reaching, ongoing and targeted to your specific workforce.”



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