

Weighing in on workplace health

Employers can play an important role in helping workers make healthy diet choices

BY NADINE HUGHES

Considering that 15 million Canadians spend one-half of their waking hours at work, at least one of their meals is consumed there and, depending on a worker's schedule, all of them might happen during work hours. So it stands to reason that Canadians' eating habits are greatly influenced by the workplace and co-workers.

More than one-half of Canadians carry excess weight, and two-thirds of these overweight individuals are facing a health risk, according to the Public Health Agency of Canada. Obesity increases the risk of coronary heart disease, osteoarthritis and various cancers. It also increases the risk of back injuries, which are a significant cost to employers as 35 per cent of all workers' compensation claims are related to back injuries.

Healthy meals, healthy minds

There has been a big focus in the media on changing individual behaviour towards eating, but little towards institutional changes — employers can do something about that. By establishing a healthy work environment, employers demonstrate a commitment to employee health. In turn, employers stand to enjoy an increase in productivity and morale, an enhanced ability to cope with stress, lower health-care costs and reduced absenteeism.

Snacks and meals in the workplace play an important role. They are often used as a means to relieve work pressure — an opportunity to take a break and be social. However, meals and snacks consumed during breaks or provided for meetings and work-sponsored events (either from cafeterias or vending machines) are often high

in fat and sugar, such as cookies, pastries and fried foods, which can lead to sluggishness on the job and unhealthy weight gain.

Although it is important for employers to provide healthy eating options, it's also beneficial to encourage a healthy lifestyle among employees that can be followed through at home and become part of family life. By providing opportunities for employees to learn and understand the basics of nutrition — food-label reading, fat, cholesterol and salt intake and fitness options — employers are more likely to see employees taking it on as a personal priority instead of viewing it solely as a corporate priority.

Offer several solutions

Implementing a healthy eating campaign, which could include healthy food options and fitness programs, can be effective for workplaces of all different sizes and budgets. There are several food solutions that can be looked at and put into practice with minimal effort and expense.

- Companies can form partnerships with local healthy vendors so employees benefit from programs such as loyalty food plans, health specials of the day and healthy food discounts.
- Workplaces that currently provide a cafeteria can also employ meal or food vouchers and healthy eating discounts. A subsidy for healthy meals in workplace cafeterias can also cut down on time spent outside of the office.
- Cafeteria workers should be well versed in *Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating* (published by Health Canada and available free online at www.hc-sc.gc.ca) in order to properly prepare food and answer questions from employees.
- Consider the environment for eating by providing comfortable and

clean conditions for employees to take their breaks and mealtimes, instead of a quick and often unhealthy meal eaten at a desk.

- Ensure work schedules provide adequate time for eating.
- Ensure meeting organizers provide snacks and meals that mirror healthy eating options, such as fresh fruit, juices, water, low-fat muffins and bagels.
- For those workplaces without a cafeteria or canteen, providing refrigerators, microwaves and hot plates makes it convenient for employees to bring their meals from home.
- Make on-site programs, such as Weight Watchers, available at work.
- If possible, encourage employees to create and stock a garden at the workplace that produces fruit and vegetables for employees' use.
- Put into action lunchtime fitness options such as intramural sports, running and walking groups, lunch-and-learn seminars on nutrition and cooking demonstrations.
- Provide pre-ordered, healthy meals-to-go for employees to take home for dinner, promoting

healthy eating habits after work hours.

- Make weekly meal planners available with shopping lists and provide the opportunity to grocery shop online (with delivery to a central workplace location) to promote healthy food choices.

Before embarking on a workplace health program, remember to keep the audience in mind. Employers must understand what motivates employees, provide a wide variety of options and be realistic with goals.

Not all employees will want to adopt a new lifestyle program. But by making it part of the company culture across all levels, most employees will pick out what is important and feasible for them and incorporate it into their daily lives.

Most people inherently want to be healthy — it is a matter of gaining the insight into how to achieve this. By facilitating this education, the employer can play an important role.

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■ SNACKING ON THE JOB

Healthy snacks in the workplace

It's good for the mind, body and soul to work mini snack breaks into the workday, but we shouldn't just mindlessly eat. This can cause quick and unhealthy overeating, without even registering what we have eaten, leaving us unsatisfied.

If you put aside your work for a few minutes and take the time to enjoy what you are eating, you will find yourself revved up and ready to go again. Here are some examples of healthy snacks to keep handy at your desk for a pick-me-up:

- trail mix and dried fruits and nuts;
- breakfast cereal (a higher-fibre, lower-sugar type);
- single-serve cans of high-fibre, low-fat and low-sodium soup (microwavable);
- instant oatmeal packets (less-sugar options);
- tuna salad kit (includes a small can of water-packed tuna and crackers);
- high-fibre, low-fat crackers;
- natural-style peanut butter with crackers, bagels and fruit; and
- packets of low-calorie hot chocolate.