

Environment, health, and safety

Workplace programs promote healthy behaviors

By Katie Slavin, BSN, RN

Workplace health promotion programs are an efficient approach to improving the health of a relatively large group of individuals because worksite interventions are more convenient and accessible to workers and often less expensive than off-site programs. The *American Journal of Health Promotion* defines optimal health as a balance of physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and intellectual health. To achieve an optimal balance of health, health promotion programs are designed to help individuals maintain and improve their health at every stage of life, helping them live longer and healthier and be more productive throughout their lifetime.

The World Health Organization (WHO) established the workplace as a priority setting for health promotion, highlighting benefits to the organization as well as to the employee. Benefits to the organization include a well-managed health and safety program, a positive and caring image, improved staff morale, increased productivity, and a reduction in staff turnover, absenteeism, health care/insurance costs and risks of fines and litigation. Secondary employee benefits highlighted by the WHO include a safe and healthy work environment, enhanced self-esteem, reduced stress, improved morale, increased job satisfaction, improved health, and improved sense of well-being.

Just as workplace conditions can affect health and well-being at home and in the community, exposures, activities, and conditions outside of working hours can substantially determine health, productivity, and responses to exposures during work hours. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health WorkLife Initiative seeks to sustain and improve worker health through better work-based programs, policies, and practices.

Leading health indicators designated in Healthy People 2010 reflecting the major public health concerns in the United States include physical activity, overweight and obesity, tobacco use, substance abuse, responsible sexual behavior, mental health, injury and violence, environmental quality, immunization, and access to health care. Nurse researcher Bonnie Rogers at the University of North Carolina states that the importance of a comprehensive approach to worker health promotion and protection must be emphasized and facilitated by using

the national health objectives as foundational elements.

The University of California, Irving Health Promotion Center (1997) developed an Information and Resource Kit on Workplace Health Promotion, in which the “Top 12” Workplace Health Promotion Strategies were designated. Safety specific strategies are as follows: form a workplace health and safety committee that meets regularly; establish a corporate policy to maintain a smoke-free/drug-free workplace; create and maintain healthy facilities by conducting workplace environmental quality audits at regular intervals and taking steps to address identified problem areas; offer occupational safety and health training programs that are targeted to the requirements of particular jobs and industries; and develop an organizational culture that is flexible, socially supportive, and responsive to employees’ needs.

The UCI recommended strategies also cover health promotion activities. In addition to ensuring compliance with Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and state-OSHA regulations, employers should implement employee lifestyle change programs such as smoking cessation, physical fitness activities, improved nutrition, lower back care, and stress reduction. Additionally, companies should demonstrate management support of health promotion (i.e. develop a corporate health promotion mission statement) and communicate regularly with employees regarding health promotion (e.g., meetings, newsletters, posters, email, payroll inserts). Programs should be regularly monitored for effectiveness, costs, benefits, and participation. UCI suggests instituting a corporate health risk appraisal and counseling program. Finally, UCI states flexible employee medical and disease prevention benefits that include clinical preventative services (e.g. immunizations) should be offered to employees and their dependents.

The American Nurses Association position statement on “Promotion and Disease Prevention” supports efforts to increase nurses’ knowledge and skill in providing preventive services. In early 2007, the American Association of Occupational Health Nurses adopted a position statement on “Occupational and Environmental Health Nurses’ Role in Improving Employee Health and Productivity.”

Nurses, as health advocates, hold the distinct opportunity to serve as role models for healthy behaviors. For this reason, the improvement of personal behaviors and lifestyle choices in the workforce can indirectly improve the health of the greater population. ★

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