



spotlight on health

How Employers Can Promote Health And Reduce Costs

(NAPS)—Healthy workers can increase productivity and profitability and reduce health care costs for their employers, and employers can affect their workers' health.

More and more employers around the country are trying to test their effect by starting healthy living programs that include nutrition classes, walking clubs and cholesterol monitoring at the work site.

These employers draw on the Prevention Research Centers (PRC) Program, part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's research arm in the battle against chronic disease. PRCs around the country develop and test interventions to prevent diseases, and all settings are fair game—churches, schools, community centers, and the workplace.

For example, researchers at the University of Washington's PRC evaluate workplace health promotion programs to find out which practices work best. The scientists tested the American Cancer Society's Workplace Solutions program to see how successful it would be when put into use by eight large employers.

The researchers introduced the intervention and then assessed changes in the employers' practices in offering health insurance benefits; in having wellness policies, workplace programs and health-promoting communication; and in tracking employee health behaviors to measure progress. Earlier research showed these practices are effective in promoting health and preventing disease.

The PRC is also studying how small-scale businesses can help low-wage workers stay healthy. These employees face health concerns they are unable to address because of low income, and sometimes employers don't understand

What can employers do?

The American Cancer Society's Workplace Solutions program recommends best practices for work site health promotion. Here is a sampling:

- Make healthy food choices available and affordable.
- Offer a workplace physical activity program.
- Provide full insurance coverage for tobacco cessation treatments.
- Post "Use the stairs" reminder signs near the elevators.
- Survey employees' health behaviors to track effectiveness of health promotion efforts.



how to help or what is needed, said Jeff Harris, M.D., director of the Washington center.

Other PRCs are using novel approaches to help workers in different industries. The PRC at the University of South Florida is testing ways to protect the eyes of citrus workers who pick fruit in orange groves. The Harvard University PRC, which works to increase physical activity in Massachusetts schoolchildren, also helps teachers stay active. Workplace health promotion activities can also extend to workers' families. The University of California at Los Angeles PRC created a program that holds sessions for parents at work during lunchtime to help them educate their teenagers about sexual health.

Research on health promotion can help ensure that the limited money a company has to spend on health promotion goes toward strategies that are really effective.

"To create incentive and sustain support, those resources must go to programs known to benefit employees' health," Dr. Harris said.

For more information about the Prevention Research Centers Program, visit www.cdc.gov/prc.

Healthy Ideas

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