

Do Healthy Employees Make a Difference? Employee Health and Wellness Enhance Business Performance



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How important are healthy employees to the success of your business?

For most U.S. meat, poultry and food processors, employees are an essential component of their daily business operations.

The quality of employees' productivity and performance is impacted by a variety of circumstances, such as morale, family concerns, and health issues, which can often result in absence from work. These issues can be addressed by companies through improved communication and a variety of health-related prevention programs, including wellness education, health screenings and counseling, and regular dental, eye care and hearing examinations.

Many business leaders recognize that offering wellness and health prevention programs is a long-term strategy that will pay dividends in lower employee absenteeism, increased productivity, and reduced healthcare expenses.

PREVENTION PROGRAMS

Wellness Education and Health Screenings

Processors of all sizes can offer employee wellness tools and health screening options that encourage employees to make the commitment to improving their health. Consider the following ideas:

1. Flu shots or health screening services for breast, colon, lung, ovarian, or prostate cancer; cholesterol; diabetes; Hepatitis B; HIV; and hypertension
2. Smoking cessation or diet counseling and education programs
3. Personal health coaches or advocates
4. Subsidized fitness programs or allocating time for employees to exercise during the day
5. Lunch-and-learn programs on eating and lifestyle choices, as well as adding healthy foods to vending machines and cafeteria menus

Processors may find that incentive programs may encourage employees to pursue goals and maintain healthier lifestyles, such as offering cash, gift certificates, merchandise discounts, days off, lower medical premiums or contributions to benefit spending accounts.

PREVENTIVE CARE WITH REGULAR CHECKUPS

A variety of health concerns can be identified through regular eye care, dental and hearing examinations.

Eye Care

Employees report that vision is the one sense they value most. A few eye care facts to consider:

- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates that 64 percent of American workers need some form of vision correction.
- More than 2,000 eye injuries occur daily in the workplace, resulting in employers paying in excess of \$500 million a year for medical bills and workers' compensation expenses. About one in 10 injuries require one or more missed workdays for healing and recovery, and 10 to 20 percent cause temporary or permanent vision loss.
- Nearly 90 percent of people who work with computers more than three hours a day experience problems with their eyes, including eyestrain, blurred vision, headaches, or dry, irritated eyes.
- According to the National Eye Institute, by 2020 approximately 5.5 million Americans will experience blindness or low vision. Recognized as one of the top 10 most frequent causes of disability, vision loss is quickly becoming a major public health concern. With the aging workforce in the United States, reports of major eye diseases will continue to increase.

Comprehensive eye examinations assess the health of employees' eyes for prevention and early detection of medical concerns, such as thyroid disease, high blood pressure, retinitis pigmentosa, eye tumors, and other eye diseases. Check your benefits to ensure that employees have access a comprehensive eye wellness examinations and not just vision tests.

Dental

Across the country, employees are taking days off to cope with problems with their teeth and gums, which can significantly affect business operations.

On average, employees annually require 6.1 million days of disability and 12.7 million days of restricted activity due to oral health issues. This amounts to 100 million lost work hours and more than 165,000 workers off the job for an entire year.

Preventive dental care could significantly reduce this loss of productivity and catch problems before they become chronic or severe. Regular dental evaluations may also reveal surprising information about seemingly unrelated health issues.

Medical professionals have identified at least 120 medical symptoms that can be detected in the mouth during routine dental checkups, including diabetes, thyroid problems, skin diseases, mental illness, leukemia, cancer, or hardening of the arteries. In fact, bleeding gums, etched enamel, and other tissue changes in the mouth are often the first clues to serious health problems. Medical studies have also revealed that pregnant women with gum disease are seven times more likely to have babies that are born too early and too small.

Hearing

Hearing loss is one of the most common occupational injuries in the U.S. More than 30 million workers are regularly exposed to toxic noise. It is the second most self-reported occupational illness or injury. Approximately 2 million people in the U.S. have experienced hearing lost. More than 10 million of impairments are at least partially attributable to damage from exposure to loud sounds, called Noise-Induced Hearing Loss (NIHL).

NIHL can be caused by a one-time exposure to a loud sound or a repetition of sounds at various loudness levels – measured in decibels – over an extended period. For example, normal conversation is approximately 60 decibels, a refrigerator hum is 40 decibels, and city traffic noise can be 80 decibels. According to medical professionals, noises above 75 decibels can cause hearing damage.

The symptoms of NIHL that occur over a period of continuous exposure increase gradually. Sounds may become distorted or muffled, and it may be difficult for employees to understand speech. While employees may not initially be aware of the loss, it can be detected during an examination by an otolaryngologist (ear, nose, throat, head and neck specialist) or hearing tests conducted by an audiologist.

Common Noises That Can Impact Hearing

| <u>Noise Risk</u> | <u>Sound Level (in decibels)</u> | <u>Hearing Loss After</u> |
|-------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Airplane Cabin | 110 | 1 minute, 29 seconds |
| Ambulance | 120 | 9 seconds |
| Chain Saw | 110 | 1 minute, 29 seconds |
| Hand drill | 98 | 23 minutes |
| Leaf Blower | 110 | 1 minute, 29 seconds |
| Rock Concert | 120 | 9 seconds |
| Tractor | 96 | 37 minutes |

THE VALUE OF HEALTH PREVENTION

Employees are your most valuable asset, and healthy employees tend to be happier, more productive, and have lower healthcare expenses. Consider making health screenings, prevention services, and wellness programs an integral component of their benefits programs and business strategies.

Karen M. Gustin, LLIF, is vice president-group marketing and managed care for Ameritas Group, a division of Ameritas Life Insurance Corp. (a UNIFI Company), with headquarters in Lincoln, Nebraska. Ameritas is one of the nation's leading providers of dental and eye care products and services. Gustin's tenure with Ameritas Group spans 24 years. She's involved with the National Association of Dental Plans (NADP), serving on the board and chairing the Statistical Task Force.

For assistance in understanding insurance plans and carrier choices, or comparing coverage options, contact the Ameritas Group marketing department at 800-776-9446.