

## Creating Healthy Lifestyles What Employers Can Do for Employees

By Mike Lindbloom, MS

**O**besity and obesity-related diseases directly impact employers and their bottom lines. According to a report based on research by Kenneth Thorpe, Ph.D., from Emory University titled *The Future Cost of Obesity: National and State Estimates of the Impact of Obesity on Direct Health Care Expenses*, Indiana's obesity-attributable health care spending in 2008 was an estimated \$1.9 billion (or \$435 per adult). If current trends continue, by 2018 these costs could soar as high as \$7 billion (or \$1,484 per adult).

With advances in technology, today's workplace looks much different than it did a few decades ago. Many employees sit at a desk for most of the day, with limited opportunities for physical activity. Today's workplace can also present a challenge for people seeking healthy, low-cost foods and beverages in cafeterias, vending machines and at meetings.

### What can be done?

Because working adults spend a significant portion of their time at the office, work sites can serve as ideal settings for improving health and preventing overweight, obesity and other associated chronic diseases. To help boost their bottom lines, employers are finding that implementing obesity prevention strategies can lead to reduced health care costs, lower absenteeism and increased productivity.

### Indiana Healthy Weight Initiative

To address the problem of overweight and obesity in Indiana, partners from across the state are collaborating to help ensure that the **healthy choice is the easy choice** with the Indiana Healthy Weight Initiative. Its mission is to enhance Hoosiers' health and quality of life by promoting good nutrition, regular physical activity and a healthy weight through policy, environmental and lifestyle changes.

A major focus of the effort is developing and executing Indiana's state plan for obesity prevention, *Indiana's Comprehensive Nutrition and Physical Activity Plan, 2010-2020*. It includes techniques to improve access to and opportunities for healthy eating, breastfeeding and physical activity in settings that include child care centers, schools, health care facilities, faith-based organizations, communities and work sites.

### What works in work sites

Policy and environmental changes are at the heart of the plan since they have the potential to reach the most employees and can be sustained for a longer period of time than individual-oriented programs. The following are low-cost, evidenced-based methods employers can use to promote healthy eating/nutrition and physical activity at the workplace:

### Physical activity

- Offer flexible hours to allow for physical activity during the day
- Put a policy in place that supports physical activity breaks, such as stretching or walking, during the day
- Host "walk and talk" meetings
- Post motivational signage by elevators and/or escalators to encourage stair use
- Provide physical activity messages and information to employees via posters, payroll stuffers, e-mail, etc.
- Install bicycle racks in safe, convenient and accessible locations to encourage biking to and from work
- Map out on-site trails or nearby walking routes and post for employees

### Healthy eating/nutrition

- Make appealing, low-cost healthy food options (e.g., fruits and vegetables, 100% juice, water, low-fat dairy products) available in vending machines
- Ensure that on-site cafeterias follow healthy cooking practices
- Send healthy food messages to employees via posters, payroll stuffers, e-mail messages, etc.
- Promote the consumption of healthy foods and beverages in cafeterias through motivational signage
- Implement a policy requiring healthy food options at meetings, conferences and catered events
- Attractively label healthy foods so they stand out
- Use competitive pricing to help make healthier choices more economical
- Provide private room and flexible scheduling for pumping breast milk and refrigerated storage

We know it will take the active involvement of many public and private partners to change community and individual behaviors. Work sites can play a key role. By working together, the people of Indiana have a tremendous opportunity to create communities that support healthy lifestyles and reduce the health and economic burdens of obesity.

For more information about the Indiana Healthy Weight Initiative and to access resources to help implement work site strategies for healthy eating and physical activity, go to [www.inhealthyweight.org](http://www.inhealthyweight.org).



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### INFORMATION LINK

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