



# Prevention Brief

VA National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention  
Office of Patient Care Services, Veterans Health Administration

<http://www.prevention.va.gov>

Oct 2007

## Employee Wellness

### Bottom Line

- Worksite wellness programs are becoming widespread within US industry and government.
- Carefully designed programs generate a return on investment of  $\geq$  \$2.50 for every dollar spent on the program.
- The most successful programs are targeted at reduction of specific risks, have multiple components, are delivered in multiple formats, and have high employee participation.

"Wellness" is a term that denotes a state of enhanced health. It is more than the simple absence of illness, and represents a point on the health continuum that conceivably has no upper limit! Wellness is holistic health that involves body, mind, and spirit. Wellness is as much psychological as it is physical, because the psyche has a profound influence upon all aspects of both physical and behavioral functioning.

Wellness is personal health in the broadest sense. Persons with a high level of wellness are energetic, enthusiastic, at peace with themselves, and approach life's challenges with vitality, a positive attitude, and joy for living. Wellness is truly an ideal state of being.

Worksite wellness programs for employees have become commonplace throughout corporate America and governmental organizations.



These programs vary greatly in their intensity and format, but all attempt to provide opportunities to enhance one's wellness through a wide variety of activities and offerings. This Prevention Brief will discuss employee wellness programs and summarize the economic benefits of such programs.

### VHA Employee Wellness Programs

The Dallas VAMC employee wellness program features:

- A fully equipped gym available from 6:00 AM – 7:00PM
- Aerobics, yoga, pilates, group strength training sessions
- A walking club with both inside and outside courses
- *MOVEmployee!* weight management services
- Smoking cessation services
- Stress management classes
- Fitness challenges
- Basketball league
- Wellness awards

Because wellness encompasses such a broad range of health factors, most programs choose to limit their focus to certain areas. Many programs start with a health risk appraisal, which may be followed by educational materials or classes. Some corporate programs also offer their employees individual wellness coaching by telephone.

Virtually all programs encourage employees to become more physically active and adopt healthier eating patterns, since these are behaviors with proven links to better health. Some make onsite exercise facilities available and offer aerobics, yoga, tai chi, etc.; others host physical activity events such as 5K runs, walks, sports events, and physical activity challenges.

Healthy eating is encouraged through cooking demonstrations, farmer's markets, posters, pamphlets, and e-mails providing tips for good nutrition. Seminars or individual counseling may also be available. Many programs offer help with weight control.

Activities aimed at reducing personal stress are common. Extended high levels of stress are associated with numerous risks to physical health as well as depression, anxiety, lower productivity, higher absenteeism, and diminished quality of life. Interventions to reduce stress typically come in the form of classes, although employee assistance programs may offer individual counseling.

Helping employees quit smoking and stay quit is another common

component. Most programs offer either an onsite smoking cessation program or refer employees to community programs. Medicines to assist with cessation may also be offered.

Wellness programs often target the work environment and the policies of the organization. Workplace modifications include adequate lighting and sound abatement, healthy food options, prompts for using stairs or being more active, and safe outdoor walking routes. Well-being is also facilitated by management practices that encourage creativity and minimize stress. Finally, wellness programs work to ensure that preventive care services are part of the standard health benefits package.

## Employee Wellness Programs



**Employee wellness programs have a return on investment of ~ \$2.50- \$4.00 for every \$1.00 spent.**

## Economics of Wellness Programs

Employee wellness programs have clearly demonstrated economic benefits for employers. A growing body of research suggests that well-designed multi-component programs delivered in multiple formats will have a return on investment (ROI) of between \$2.50 to \$4.00 or more for every dollar spent on the program. Newer and more carefully targeted programs typically achieve an ROI of \$6 or more per \$1 spent on the program.

Programs often utilize a health risk appraisal instrument to identify specific health risks. Program activities then focus on reducing specific risks such as tobacco use, excess weight, depression and other mental health concerns, stress, sedentary lifestyle, and poor nutrition. In general, the more intensive and focused the program, the greater the ROI.

Employers can also achieve a higher ROI through having a large percentage of their employees participate. Providing financial incentives, having multi-component

programming to meet the needs of different employees (including those who are already very healthy), and strong marketing communications are effective strategies to achieve high participation rates.

The tangible benefits of employee wellness programs to employers are reductions in health care costs, absenteeism, workers compensation, disability costs, and employee turnover. Furthermore, healthy employees consistently demonstrate higher productivity. Intangible benefits include improved employee morale and satisfaction, stronger commitment and loyalty to the organization, and higher personal quality of life.

Corporations are increasingly recognizing the value of Employee Wellness to their bottom line. As stewards of public funds, the federal government has also begun to recognize its value. Efforts at all levels are underway to provide benefits and services to increase federal employee wellness.

## Additional Resources



**“Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”**

- World Health Organization, 1948

### Patient/Employee Tools

- *MOVE!* Handout B32 (Wellness) at: [http://www.move.va.gov/download/NewHandouts/BehavioralHealth/B32\\_Wellness.pdf](http://www.move.va.gov/download/NewHandouts/BehavioralHealth/B32_Wellness.pdf)
- Information on the NCP website at: [http://www.prevention.va.gov/Health\\_Promotion\\_Employee\\_Wellness.asp](http://www.prevention.va.gov/Health_Promotion_Employee_Wellness.asp)
- University of California Berkeley Wellness Letter at: [www.wellnessletter.com](http://www.wellnessletter.com)
- CDC’s Healthier Workplace Initiative at: <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/hwi/index.htm>

### Clinician Tools

- Information on the NCP website at: [http://www.prevention.va.gov/Health\\_Promotion\\_Employee\\_Wellness.asp](http://www.prevention.va.gov/Health_Promotion_Employee_Wellness.asp)
- Wellness Councils of America website downloads at: <http://www.welcoa.org/freresources/?PHPSESSID=47069c977256c8aefcf8050a612e4327>
- National Wellness Institute website at: <http://www.nationalwellness.org/>

### Additional Reading

- Chapman, Larry S. Proof Positive: An Analysis of the Cost Effectiveness of Worksite Wellness. Northwest Health Management Publishing, Seattle, WA. 2007.
- Chapman, Larry S. Meta Evaluation of Worksite Health Promotion Economic Return Studies: 2005 Update. *The Art of Health Promotion*, 2005, Jul/Aug: 1-15.
- Edington, Dee W. Emerging Research: A View From One Research Center. *Am. J Health Promotion*, 2001, 15(5):341-349.
- Golaszewski, Thomas. Shining Lights: Studies That Have Most Influenced the Understanding of Health Promotion’s Financial Impact. *Am. J Health Promotion*, 2001, 15(5):332-340.