

# Benefits Insights

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## Exploring Obesity's Impact on the Workplace

Obesity has become a global health epidemic, affecting millions of individuals worldwide. Beyond its impact on personal well-being, obesity poses significant challenges for employers and workplaces. Whether it's decreased productivity or increased health care costs, the repercussions of obesity in the workplace are far-reaching.

This article discusses the multifaceted impact of obesity on employers and the ways employers are addressing this issue.

### Obesity and the American Workplace

Obesity is a common, serious and costly chronic disease that affects nearly half of U.S. adults. According to the American Obesity Association, 50% of Americans will live with obesity by 2025, with this proportion jumping to 60% by 2030.

Furthermore, obesity-related conditions—such as heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and certain types of cancer—are among the leading causes of preventable, premature death. Obesity is also associated with poorer mental health outcomes and reduced quality of life.

As obesity impacts millions of Americans, it naturally also takes a toll on the workplace. Fortunately, with the proper knowledge, employers can use their influence to help employees live healthier lives. Nevertheless, obesity in the workplace can result in substantial costs and employee productivity losses due to the following:

- **Health care costs**—With indirect costs included, health care spending related to obesity is roughly \$450 billion annually. Obesity is linked to various chronic and costly diseases, such as arthritis, diabetes and heart disease. Additionally, employees who are overweight cost their employers \$73.1

billion a year and file twice the number of workers' compensation claims.

- **Absenteeism**—Overweight employees generally take more sick days each year than other employees, adding to employers' growing costs. When compared to other employees of average weight, obese individuals missed, on average, three more days per year due to injury or illness.
- **Presenteeism**—Presenteeism refers to the practice of an employee coming to work when they have a justifiable reason to be absent, such as a physical or mental illness. These health issues could be short-lived concerns (e.g., seasonal allergies or headaches) or chronic conditions (e.g., obesity). According to a Northeast Business Group on Health report, lost productivity costs caused by presenteeism equate to more than double the medical expenses employers incur from employees with obesity when compared to employees of average weight.

Since Americans spend a significant amount of time working, the workplace is a logical environment to leverage in combatting the obesity epidemic. As such, understanding obesity, its causes and its consequences is essential for employers. Although obesity is widespread, it may be helpful for employers to review and assess how much this disease is costing their respective organizations, particularly in terms of employee productivity and absenteeism.



### Employer Strategies

Since obesity is expected to remain a significant public health issue, employers will need to think outside the box to adequately address this disease among their respective workforces. Organizations may consider addressing obesity through the following workplace initiatives:

- **Traditional workplace programs**—Besides offering insurance coverage for obesity screening and counseling services, many employers have implemented various strategies to promote work environments conducive to healthy choices that can help employees reduce their risk of obesity. Behavioral programs that combine education with incentives have proven most effective in on-site and remote work settings. Examples of behavioral programs include company sports teams, discounted membership to gyms or fitness centers, flexible hours to allow employees to incorporate physical activity into their workdays, and weight loss competitions and incentives.
- **Obesity care benefits**—As emerging obesity medications become popular, more employers are exploring metabolic health. However, most health insurance plans do not cover weight loss drugs, and the medications are expensive, at least \$1,000 per month. As weight loss drugs continue to trend, health plan sponsors are facing increased pressure to cover such medications. In the meantime, employers should evaluate employee wants and needs and consider covering weight loss drugs for employees living with obesity.
- **Anti-weight stigma environment**—Weight stigma is a bias that consists of negative attitudes and stereotypes toward individuals who are overweight or have obesity. The stigma that people struggling with obesity experience in the workplace can have many consequences. Bullying and shaming can greatly impact physical and mental health. It can be challenging for employers to establish programs to tackle obesity because of the highly personal nature of this topic. Still, there are respectful and inclusive ways to do so, such as choosing appropriate images to communicate weight and health by portraying individuals with well-kept appearances and appropriate-fitting clothes and normalizing

conversations about obesity. Outside of behaviors, employers may also offer adjustable desks and larger chairs without arms to accommodate various body types. Such efforts may help employees feel more comfortable in the workplace and have equipment that properly supports their bodies.

- **Holistic approaches**—Since behavioral changes don't fully address obesity, employers can offer resources to help employees navigate their weight loss journeys or maintain healthy lifestyles. These resources should discuss obesity prevention, management and treatment. Once employees have identified potential health issues, they will likely need guidance and care to address these conditions, recover from them and remain healthy. Treatment options for obesity can be specific to nutrition and physical activity. Making these treatment options more accessible and affordable can ultimately help minimize future health complications.

Obesity is a progressive disease that requires both prevention and treatment. Workplace obesity management is best achieved through complex and tailored strategies that meet employees where they're at and offer the proper support and necessary resources.

### Summary

Obesity is not simply the result of a person's lifestyle or behavior. This disease can also be attributed to other factors, such as genetics, food availability, physical environments and education opportunities. To be impactful, weight loss programs—and wellness programs in general—should be multifaceted and focus on disease prevention and sustained behavior changes. Since employees spend one-third of their days working, the workplace is an excellent environment for making healthy lifestyle changes.

Contact us for more information about obesity and employee well-being.