



# FAST FACTS



## Obesity in the Workplace

**OBESITY** is a complex chronic disease in which abnormal or excessive accumulation of body fat impairs health. Adult obesity rates have more than doubled since the 1980s — in the U.S. today, obesity affects over 1 in 3 adults and almost 1 in 5 youth.<sup>1</sup> Obesity and its related complications are major drivers of rising healthcare costs, diminished health-related quality of life, and a decline in U.S. life expectancy. This fact sheet is part of a series designed to provide basic information about the science of obesity and current strategies to address it.

### Attitudes on Weight Management in the Workplace

**The average American will spend 1/3 of their life in the workplace.<sup>2</sup> Obesity causes multiple chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers, as well as employee burnout and loss of productivity.<sup>3,4</sup> The indirect costs of absenteeism and presenteeism associated with overweight and obesity among American workers may amount to more than \$900 billion (\$6,000 per employee).<sup>5</sup>**

- A 2008 survey designed to assess employers' and employees' attitudes regarding obesity and weight management programs in the workplace found that:<sup>6</sup>
  - A majority of employers viewed obesity as a preventable disease associated with poor lifestyle choices and/or lack of willpower
  - A majority of employees believed that on-site exercise facilities, subsidized healthy foods in workplace cafeterias, and discounts/incentives for participation in weight management programs were helpful in reaching and/or maintaining a healthier weight
- In a 2016 survey of 487 large U.S. businesses (1,000+ employees), of those that offered weight management programs, only 10% of employees recommended for participation actually accessed the services.<sup>7</sup>
  - Employers cited lack of employee engagement as a major barrier to program success
  - Underutilization of workplace wellness offerings may reflect several factors, including misalignment of employer offerings with employee needs and weight stigma
  - Comprehensive interventions that provide health screening, lifestyle management, and disease management services draw the highest rates of employee participation, regardless of incentives<sup>8</sup>
- Most employees believe that insurance companies should be required to cover obesity treatment and prevention programs.<sup>7</sup>
  - Employees, especially those with obesity, are willing to contribute slightly more for premiums to ensure that all workers were covered for preventive services<sup>6</sup>

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Employees generally support incentives for participating in obesity prevention and management activities.
- Obesity can lead to chronic disease, disability, burnout, and loss of productivity. This can be costly to both employers and employees.
- Employers wishing to decrease obesity-related costs should consider systematic approaches to workplace wellness.

### LEARN MORE

*Obesity in the Workplace  
ACTION Study  
Employee Wellbeing*

## What are the Costs of Obesity to Employers?

### Healthcare Costs



For each BMI point above the healthy range, average medical costs increase by <sup>9</sup>

**\$194-\$222** per year, per employee

### Disability Claims



**76%** increased risk of short-term **disability** among employees with obesity <sup>10</sup>

### Lost Productivity



**10%** of all U.S. **absenteeism** costs are attributable to obesity <sup>11,12</sup>

## What Can Employers Do?

**U.S. employers are increasingly open to implementing policies that recognize the interconnectedness of community health, workplace environments, employee productivity, and company profitability.** Systematic approaches to the promotion of wellness in worksites may be a good investment that enhances both recruitment and retention of employees. <sup>13</sup>

- Salient strategies to support healthy weight management typically include promotion of workplace policies and practices that:
  - Increase the availability, affordability, and consumption of healthful foods and beverages
  - Promote physical activity and limit sedentary behaviors
  - Encourage breastfeeding initiation and continuation
  - Enhance coverage for obesity screening, counseling, and treatment services
- While individual weight status should not be used as the basis for incentives or penalties, modest monetary rewards (\$50-\$100), free/discounted health services, and/or company recognition can encourage employees to complete health-risk assessments and boost engagement in lifestyle management programs.
- Employers should include comprehensive coverage for obesity treatments—e.g. medical visits for behavioral health interventions, anti-obesity medications, and bariatric surgery—to maximize engagement and satisfaction among employees with obesity.

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