



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.¹ 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.² Obesity causes multiple chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers, as well as employee burnout and loss of productivity.^{3,4} 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).⁵

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.

- A 2008 survey designed to assess employers' and employees' attitudes regarding obesity and weight management programs in the workplace found that:⁶
 - 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.⁷
 - 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 incentives⁸
- Most employees believe that insurance companies should be required to cover obesity treatment and prevention programs.⁷
 - Employees, especially those with obesity, are willing to contribute slightly more for premiums to ensure that all workers were covered for preventive services⁶

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*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 by⁹
\$194-\$222 per year, per employee

Disability Claims



76% increased risk of short-term **disability** among employees with obesity¹⁰

Lost Productivity



10% of all U.S. **absenteeism** costs are attributable to obesity^{11,12}

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.¹³

- 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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