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## Eating Your Way to Wellness

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Benefits Pro

We do the math on [employee wellness](#) all the time.

It takes about 23,000 steps, or 4 to 5 hours, to walk off a popular fast-food burger and fries. Count on logging 2,800 steps to burn off a 12-ounce can of regular soda. Barring a spot as a contestant on one of the popular weight-loss TV shows, most of us don't have enough hours in the day to exercise away overweight conditions.

Let's realistically assume the average Joe can manage the treadmill and pumping iron for some cardio and toning purposes. This means we're still left with the elephant in the room: obesity and related conditions such as diabetes and hypertension. And then there's that perpetual blue feeling that comes from not being able to fit into cool-looking jeans.

Thomas Frieden, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warns, "Obesity and resulting diabetes are the only major health problems that are getting worse in this country, and they're getting worse rapidly." Expense related to obesity in most organizations has now outstripped costs tied to stress management, smoking cessation, and addiction intervention.

So how do we stem the several billion-dollar annual bleed on U.S. business that is directly linked to overweight conditions?

Medical care costs, absenteeism, lagging productivity and a lumbering feel to morale largely make up the fall out. How do we reconcile that there have never been so many wellness "solutions" and we've never been so sick as a nation and headed toward further cost and calamity? What will it take to effectively manage weight, diabetes and metabolic syndrome?

We have to eat our way out of this predicament. Period. Nutrition is the key driver behind preventive health for most anyone. And the reality is: Eating isn't an option, while exercise is.

As part of all-important workplace wellness, employers need to take responsibility for supporting nutrition habit change beyond supplying the occasional *Eat More Veggies!* seminar and leafy-green vending machine options. Providing stipends for this and that diet program for this and that employee feels purposeful, but it's disjointed and more of a band-aid than the needed tourniquet. And hinging success on today's free resources, such as stir-fry tofu recipes on the Internet, is nothing more than wishful thinking.

Company investment dedicated to the nutrition habits of the highest-risk individuals who will up and leave as part of routine turnover is similarly catching the effort up short — expensively. Besides, we've repeatedly demonstrated that those who are the most overweight are more likely to establish eat-better routines that last when part of an all-in, bandwagon approach. Who among us didn't want to be part of the cool group in the cafeteria, after all?

Yes, walking clubs, lunch-n-learns and team competitions are well-intentioned and can be instrumental as part of a comprehensive wellness program. But without a tactical approach to support nutrition habit change on an ongoing basis for all employees and steadfast conviction to stop confusing activity for achievement, the rest is almost superfluous.

Perhaps surprisingly, employers of all sizes have the wherewithal to get the job done. We often have to remind companies that their strategic, outcomes-oriented thinking caps work well when it comes to hitting sales targets, rolling out new products/services, and recruiting top-notch workers. "You know how to do this, you just need to start doing it for wellness ..."

we advise employer groups to tackle wellness and nutrition habit change by embracing the seven points noted below. With the right resources, the transformation can start almost overnight. The math simply doesn't lie. Nor do cool-looking jeans.

- The key driver behind preventive health centers on nutrition.
- Nutrition habits rarely change sustainably in a vacuum (e.g., special, high-priced meals delivered to your home; counting up your own calories/points while your family chugs along on a different plan, etc.) and almost never through endeavors such as a 6-week-long challenge or seminar. We don't count temporary blips — which all of these examples produce with regularity — as sustainable solutions.
- The highest-risk individuals demonstrate sustainable habit change more often when part of an all-in, bandwagon approach.
- An easy-to-understand-and-adopt, suggestive approach that promotes moderation over deprivation has the most chance of habit-change success across broad demographics.
- Effective nutrition-centered support includes:
  1. A foundational resource accessible by all employees and associated family members that provides highly engaging tools/tips surrounding: education, celebration, menu planning, recipe prep and grocery shopping. This resource should be a constant—think of it as cornerstone content buttressing your overall wellness efforts.

There are a lot of colorless, tedious varieties of this type of content, often as part of an insurer's stab at wellness support. Yes, no one does read *this* stuff.

It's important to go for information that is: tailored to employer groups, updated frequently, and produced by professionals with an impressive track record. By establishing a common language surrounding eating better among all organizational stakeholders, you create shared responsibility and accountability. Now you're off to the races with a measurable change to your wellness DNA.

2. Activities that are synergistic with the resource outlined in #1 immediately above. Events that many HR departments already organize fit here. The difference is that lunch-n-learns and fresh fruit deliveries are now tied to the cornerstone content that thoughtfully integrates education and useful tools.

- Skin in the game matters, as does: You get what you pay for.
- Prioritizing achievement over activity makes you look like Einstein did the math.

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