

Throw Away That Scale

The Hidden Harm of Weight Loss Programs

A Special White Paper by Scott Foster, Wellness Expert



Weight loss is one of the most common New Year's resolutions, and one of the most commonly abandoned. Your employees will be affected by weight loss long after the resolutions have been forgotten. Here are five proven strategies to lower health risks and their associated costs in the long term.

1. Make Changes for the Right Reasons.

Do people want to lose weight to feel better, or merely to look better? Most people, *even at a healthy weight*, are still unsatisfied with the way they look. Women, in particular, are vulnerable to unrealistic societal standards of beauty, bombarded as they are with images of super-thin models. A systematic review of commercial weight loss programs published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* found that fully half of women wanted major changes to their bodies. Many "hated" what they looked like, and more than half would consider plastic surgery. Almost 10% have made themselves sick in order to lose weight. Men, too, are not immune to cultural pressure.

To lose weight, many people will take pills or supplements they know to be dangerous. The side effects of the amphetamine-like drug fen-phen (sold under the brand names Redux and Podamin®) were highly publicized during its 1997 recall: high blood pressure, heart palpitations, dizziness, blurred vision, headaches, insomnia, anxiety, and depression. This did little to reduce the demand for quick-fix weight loss products, however. For example, alli, the first over-the-counter weight-loss pill, works by blocking fat in ingested food. The drug's maker, GlaxoSmithKline, suggests that users wear dark pants or bring a change of clothes to work, in preparation for its embarrassing side effects. Yet dieters have been rushing to buy it. When contemplating weight loss, do it to improve your health, rather than at the expense of your health.

2. Remember, diets don't work.

With annual revenues of \$35 billion at stake, the diet industry has enormous incentive to keep promoting products and services, whatever their efficacy. Look, instead, to the many good studies that have objectively evaluated weight loss programs' results.

Client testimonials, a popular and valuable marketing tool, can be very deceptive. Research by *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, and *Archives of Internal Medicine* followed weight loss programs beyond the traditional 12-week period used in testimonials. Results consistently show that typically, participants gain their weight back within one year. After two years, nearly half of the participants weigh more than they did before they went on the diet.

Rather than waste money on gimmicks, it's best to stick to the tried-and-true principles of healthy eating and exercise.

3. Aim for the right goal: fitness.

Fitness is more important than thinness, according to research. Apparently, many of the risks associated with obesity are actually caused by physical inactivity. This confusion is understandable. For example, Mississippi, the state with the highest obesity rate, is also the state with the highest rate of inactivity.

A landmark study by renowned epidemiologist Dr. Steven Blair found that those who maintained or improved fitness were less likely to die from all causes, including heart disease, compared to those who were unfit, *regardless of*

their weight. When physical activity increases, even when weight loss is minimal, health problems like diabetes improve, as does overall health. Even intellectual performance is affected by exercise. Schoolchildren's mathematics, English, and reading scores are all shown to improve, based upon fitness level.

4. Preventive care is for everyone.

When it comes to health, looks tell surprisingly little. We have never finished a single day of corporate HealthHammer testing without identifying "walking time bombs," many of whom are of normal weight and have healthy lifestyles. It is vital that individuals have an annual checkup with their personal physician and that they know, rather than guess, their personal risk factors, such as blood pressure, total cholesterol, and HDL cholesterol.

Once they know the real risk, people can prioritize preventive health. The New England Journal of Medicine recently reported a 65% reduction in heart disease through blood pressure control, cholesterol reduction, increased activity, and no cigarette smoking. Other studies show that heart disease, the number one danger and cost, is nearly completely eliminated for men and women without risk factors at age 50. Risk factors are eliminated through healthy habits and regular physician visits to address potential problems.

Preventive care should be a priority to your organization, since it saves lives and money. Medical costs are expected to increase to \$12,000 per person and 20% of the gross domestic product by 2015.

5. Be "The Biggest Winner"

TV's "The Biggest Loser" may inspire you to offer similar programs and contests to your workforce. Instead of weight loss, consider providing a healthy eating or walking program for employees of every size. Make your program part of a comprehensive health program that includes annual, on-site health screening.

If you still feel inclined to offer weight loss, make it a small component of overall health, and follow best-practice examples. Encourage your employees to maintain their current weight without gaining, rather than lose weight. Call the initial weigh-in "0" and future measurements "+" and "-" so participants don't get further discouraged by their weight in numbers. Monitor weight fluctuation only. Focus on the cause of any weight gain rather than the weight itself. For example, "Have you become less active, or started eating more fast food?"

The evidence is clear that for the greatest benefit for individuals and their companies, greater emphasis should be placed on overall health and the prevention of dangerous and costly conditions. Then, you will see health and financial success long beyond the New Year.

Scott Foster is a Corporate Wellness Expert for Wellco. Wellco is a Michigan wellness firm that specializes in addressing employee health risks before they become dangerous and costly.

For more information about Scott Foster, Wellco, or the HealthHammer™ employee health risk appraisal and management system, visit www.welcocorp.com or call (866) 636-9355 (WELL).



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