

A healthy workplace: employees need to be proactive in their diets and preventative care to...

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PBY DEBORAH J. MYERS, *Alaska Business Monthly*

People feel caught, like their skills are invaluable and they come in when they're sick,"

--Jan Beauchamp Infection Control and Employee Health Coordinator Bartlett Regional Hospital Juneau

Employee illnesses cost companies money--\$260 billion nationwide in 2003, according to survey data gathered by the New York-based Commonwealth Fund. The health care research organization found that in the same year, 69 million employees said they had missed work because of illness, totaling 407 million days of lost work.

Other high-risk populations include those with chronic underlying medical conditions, the elderly, employees with direct public contact and those who care for young children. Most employees fall into one or more of those categories, so immunizing all of them is the easiest route to take.

Flu immunization shots cost only \$8 to \$30 apiece, depending upon if your employees go to a clinic or have a nurse visit your location.

"We've found that (the shots) pay for themselves," said Ann-Marie Martin, program coordinator for Harris Health Trends Inc. in Juneau.

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She recommends offering the shots free to employees to ensure they receive them.

Pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine (PPV) helps prevent illnesses such as pneumonia and meningitis and helps minimize the impact of these diseases on those who have had them in the past. Consider offering PPV for those in high-risk categories, such as those with compromised immune systems, previous related illnesses, and those over age 65.

Keeping your employees healthy is in their best interest as well as yours as an employer. Lost time costs productivity, drives up health insurance premiums and hurts morale. Fortunately, it has never been easier to minimize your employees' health risks.

Proactive Care

Short-term illnesses have the most immediate effect on your employees. When illnesses such as colds, flu and intestinal "bugs" sweep through a workplace, the results can devastate attendance.

One easy way to reduce influenza from squelching your productivity is to offer immunization shots, which Jennifer Grogg, infection control practitioner with Mat-Su Regional Medical Center in Palmer, said are about 89 percent effective.

A Healthy Workplace

Keeping the workplace clean also is an inexpensive way to reduce communicable illnesses. Make sure that areas that are frequently touched by many people--such as

Unfortunately, only about 47 percent to 48 percent of the population use them.

Jan Beauchamp, infection control and employee health coordinator at Bartlett Regional Hospital in Juneau, said that all the staff receives flu shots because "they fall into the high-risk category as a health organization."

doorknobs, shared equipment and hand rails--are swabbed with disinfectant cleaner frequently and then allowed to air dry. >

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“Most of these cleaners for the home or industrial use require air-dry time to be fully effective,” Grogg said.

Restrooms, break rooms, reception rooms and other high-traffic areas need daily cleaning.

To keep work areas cleaner, Cameale Johnson recommends equipping each with disinfectant wipes and waterless hand sanitizers.

“If you have them readily available, people will use them,” she said. “Hand hygiene is the single most important thing you can do to prevent infections.”

Johnson is the infection control program director for Alaska Regional Hospital in Anchorage.

Employees should also be encouraged to practice hygiene etiquette. Distribute information around the workplace about issues such as washing one’s hands after using the restroom, eliminating communal bowls of unwrapped candy and not sharing sneezes and coughs.

Employees should try capturing sneezes and coughs in facial tissues or handkerchiefs (and subsequently washing the hands) or else directing the sneeze or cough toward the floor, away from others.

Sick Leave Pays Off

Cross-train employees so that no one feels he must come to work ill; someone will take his place for a couple of days.

“People feel caught, like their skills are invaluable and they come in when they’re sick,” Beauchamp said.

Consider offering telecommuting for positions where that’s possible so that employees can get a few things done if they feel up to it, but won’t share their germs with the whole staff.

Water and Snacks

Keeping hydrated is also essential to warding off illnesses. Johnson advises employers to maintain a drinking fountain or stock water bottles in each work area for employees.

“Encourage staff to take care of themselves by eating right, exercising and examining their habits,” Beauchamp said.

Provide cafeteria food, snack machine goodies and meeting munchies that are healthful. Drink machines

should offer milk, water, juice and tea, not just sugary soft drinks.

Distribute nutritional information on bulletin boards, in paychecks and newsletters. (Www.cdc.gov and www.webmd.com are both good sources of free health information.) By keeping their bodies fueled with nutrient-laden foods, your employees will be less susceptible to illness and disease.

Keeping fit is vital to good health, and, as an employer, you can help employees who want to be fit. Flex-time can enable employees to hit the gym on a lunch break for a quick workout.

You could also start lunch-break walking groups if your work is sedentary. Equip employees with a pedometer and challenge them to walk 10,000 steps per day for better health.

Look into offering discounted gym memberships. Some gyms can provide a group rate to employers. If your company is small, band together with other small employers to see if you can leverage a discounted rate for your employees.

Give employees exercise mats, water bottles or other exercise gear as gifts for holidays or for special recognition.

Education can be the catalyst for employees improving their long-term health. Exercise tips, for example, can help employees formulate their own workout so that they can ward off obesity and the host of health problems that accompany it.

Wellness Counts

Many companies are using wellness or health risk surveys to help employees profile their own health and lifestyle choices. Once they see where their health needs lie, they can see where changes should occur, such as lowering cholesterol or increasing their exercise.

Smoking cessation, weight control, alcohol consumption, and depression management are just a few of the areas a wellness program can address.

Although some companies run such programs internally, it can be difficult for small employers to do ➤



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so, not only because of the expense, but also because issues surrounding employee privacy.

“Some employees don’t feel comfortable giving their health information to their employer,” Martin said, “so it’s better hiring an outside company.”

An outside company would also have greater access to information and resources to help your employee reach their optimal health.

Tying in the health risk assessment survey with a health fair can make the paperwork more fun for employees, as well as offer more hands-on health screenings such as heart tests, bone density screenings or checking cholesterol. Some organizations that offer these services, and more, are Alaska Open Imaging, Fairbanks Memorial Hospital, Alaska Family Wellness Center, Diabetic Consultants of Alaska and Providence Alaska Medical Center.

Give employees an extended lunchtime to enjoy the fair and perhaps serve a few meals such as fresh fruit, light submarine sandwiches, baked chips and skim milk.

To boost participation, provide plenty of door prizes and perhaps draw names for one big-ticket item.

Don’t Forget Mental Health

Health risks are not only physical. Many more employers are helping their employees maintain good mental health. Employees need resources to deal with factors such as stress, grief and lack of sunlight (often a trigger for Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD) that can jeopardize their mental health and cause lost time.

Stress in employees’ lives can come from everyday problems at work or home and even positive changes, such as the birth of a child, planning for retirement or training for a promotion. Coping with stress is essential for good mental health. Sometimes, just an afternoon off is just the ticket.

Keeping a list of counselors can help management know where to send employees who need help. You can also offer short-term stress relief workshops that train employees how to deal with life’s ups and downs. Keep the break room a stress-free zone by discouraging talk about work or problems there.

Especially when a tragedy impacts the corporate body such as a violent burglary or employees being killed

in a natural disaster, it is vital to offer a means for the remaining employees to cope.

“I loan out SAD lights to people,” said Martin, who keeps a stock of six of the white fluorescent lights in her office. “I give them info about SAD and about different lights they can buy and they try it out and see if it helps before they go purchase one.”

To help employees make these changes, many companies use coaches (often from the same company that manage the assessments) to give employees complimentary, telephonic, one-on-one coaching regarding their health care issues, if the employee desires the help.

As a means of increasing participation in the wellness program, some employers offer discounts on health care premiums. Eating more of the cost is an investment in the future as well as a perk to the employee.

“Companies are finding that to get people to make changes, you have to pay them, unfortunately,” Martin said.

A few employers are taking the opposite approach and refusing to hire employees that have certain risky lifestyle behaviors; however, this tactic is not recommended because of the discrimination issues that could arise.

Although you can’t prevent your employees from every illness and disease, with a few easy steps, you can minimize their risks of losing work time.



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