

# WHY NUTRITION HITS HOME AT THE WORKPLACE

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**WHY SHOULD** employers be concerned about their employees' dietary habits? Consider the rate of adult obesity and its impact on the workplace.

In a recent study, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reports the occurrence of adult obesity in the United States was 33.5 percent among men and 36.1 percent among women<sup>1</sup> Poor dietary habits are linked to numerous chronic diseases, among them heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, Type 2 Diabetes, and various cancers.<sup>2</sup>

These health concerns can be a direct and indirect cost for employers. Overweight and obese individuals generally use more health care, are less productive at work, and miss work more often, studies now show.

Worksites are often overlooked as a crucial setting for prompting dietary habits. The average full-time employee spends forty-seven hours a week at work, according to a 2014 national Gallop poll. Employers have the opportunity to influence a significant number of employees regarding nutrition while offering healthy dietary options.

Beginning the journey toward developing healthier eating habits, for many, is overwhelming. Here's how employers can help:

### Build Awareness

Start by creating a culture of health at the

workplace. Build employee awareness and focus education efforts on incorporating healthier eating habits. Company leadership must be involved in order to be successful.

Keep in mind there's confusion about what constitutes healthy eating. Mixed messages and unhealthy food choices offered at the workplace can be barriers to dietary changes. Promote fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and healthy proteins, such as fish, chicken, beans, and nuts in your nutrition education campaigns. In addition, take advantage of these three proven wellness strategies:

#### #1 Promote Healthy Eating

- Use bulletin boards, flyers, and posters throughout the office to promote healthy eating and healthy lifestyle changes. Various resources are available on request for A.I.M. Mutual policyholders.
- Share healthy eating tips in internal newsletters and employee emails (**Figure 1**).
- Create a designated wellness nook that provides take-home resources on healthy eating behaviors.

#### #2 Develop Skills

- Provide employees access to on-site Lunch & Learn sessions. Invite a nutritionist or registered dietician to discuss basic nutrition and how to read food labels, for example.

- Send out employee surveys to elicit feedback on topics of interest. Supply self-assessment tools that employees can use to track eating habits.
- Offer incentive programs by subsidizing gym memberships and weight loss programs, such as Weight Watchers.

#### #3 Establish a Healthy Eating Policy and a Supportive Work Environment

- Take a visual scan of the current workplace environment to decide which wellness initiatives will work best.
- Establish a healthy eating policy for the worksite that provides healthy food options in vending machines, cafeterias, and at meetings.
- Provide on-site refrigerators and microwaves for the storing and preparing of nutritious meals and snacks.
- Ask managers and supervisors to send reminders periodically, encouraging employees to attend nutrition sessions.

Growing research shows employers can make a real difference in their employees' eating habits. The right tools and resources at work can help employees make educated and positive dietary changes, resulting in long-term health benefits. ▣

Figure 1 - Healthy Eating At Work (Source: Dieticians of Canada)

Situation	Try To Limit	Try Instead
Meetings	Donuts, large muffins, cookies, cream & sugar	Small muffins, low fat yogurt, english muffins, fresh fruit
Vending Machines / Trucks	Danish, Chocolate bars, french fries, soda, chips	Juices / water, low salt pretzels, sandwiches, milk
Hectic / Long Hours	Chips, cookies, coffee with cream, hot dogs, pizza	Fresh fruit, english muffins, raw vegetables, lean sliced meats
On The Road / Lunch	Chips, fried foods, large burgers, salads loaded w/ dressings	Small burgers, whole grain bagels, cereal bars, whole grain crackers

### Citations

1. Ogden CL, Carroll MD, Kit BK, Flegal KM. "Prevalence of Childhood and Adult Obesity in the United States," 2011-2012. *JAMA*. 2014;311(8):806-814. doi:10.1001/jama.2014.732.
2. US Department of Agriculture and US Department of Health and Human Services. *Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2010*. 7th Edition, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, December 2010.