28. Health Promotion Programs

Introduction

Employer-sponsored health promotion programs gained prominence in the early 1980s. Originally, these programs focused on physical fitness and often encouraged employees to exercise, eat well, quit smoking, and moderate alcohol consumption. Employers hoped that by initiating these programs they would increase productivity and morale, reduce absenteeism and turnover, and manage health care costs.

Health promotion programs, also called “wellness” or “fitness” programs, have changed considerably over the years. Today, programs are emphasizing prevention of physical and emotional illness by using self-care and targeted strategies to encourage healthier lifestyles. Employers are trying to motivate and educate employees on healthy living as well as provide opportunities for employees to participate in healthy activities. Employee assistance programs (EAPs) are also being used to address the physical and mental health of employees. EAPs are generally counseling services directed toward acute problems that affect job performance, such as drug and alcohol abuse and emotional and financial problems. (For more information on employee assistance programs, see chapter 29.)

It is estimated that 81 percent of companies with 50 or more employees offered at least one health promotion activity in 1992, compared with approximately 66 percent in early 1985 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1993). In showing concern for employees’ physical and mental health, employers might provide information on such problems as substance abuse, smoking, and stress through seminars, classes, or written materials and/or start programs to assist employees in changing patterns of behavior that can lead to poor health.

Health promotion programs are being developed and offered by employers to address a number of issues. According to a 1992 survey of work site health promotion programs, improving employee health is the most frequently cited reason for initiating a health promotion program (41 percent of work sites initiated a program for this reason), followed by reducing employee health insurance costs (27 percent), improving employee morale (17 percent), and responding to employee requests (13 percent) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1993).

Types of Health Promotion Programs

Health promotion programs range from modest efforts (e.g., the distribution of pamphlets on health issues or the provision of showers or changing facilities for employees who exercise) to individually targeted strategies for intervention and health improvement to major initiatives such as elaborate, well-equipped gymnasiums and a full package of physical fitness activities.

One type of health promotion program—health screening—encourages good health through early detection and intervention for medical problems. Under a group health plan, employers may waive deductibles or copayments for specific screenings. Common screenings include high blood pressure, breast cancer, diabetes, high cholesterol levels, and annual physical examinations. Screenings are sometimes followed by education or counseling on how to reduce identified risks. Other programs involve classes and seminars on such topics as good nutrition and ways to stop smoking, lose weight, and manage stress.

Another type of health promotion program rates the employee’s lifestyle and determines the cost of that particular employee’s health care based on his or her personal lifestyle choices. An unhealthy lifestyle may include smoking, excessive alcohol consumption,
overeating, and not exercising. Based on the belief that employees who participate in such activities have higher health plan claims, employers will use a reward/penalty system that will discourage these unhealthy behaviors.

Some companies have their own exercise facilities for employees (and sometimes for family members as well), with swimming pools, jogging tracks, saunas, racquetball/handball courts, and workout rooms. If they do not have their own facilities, employers sometimes pay a share of an employee’s health club membership.

Many companies and unions have initiated one or more of these wellness programs. The most common programs were basic screening for blood pressure and cholesterol (91 percent of companies that initiated a program offered this service), information on nutrition and healthy lifestyles (78 percent), smoking cessation (74 percent), weight loss (67 percent), and health club discounts (41 percent) (William M. Mercer, 1993). Other programs addressed disease prevention, medical self-care materials, and safety.

**Planning a Health Promotion Program**

Careful planning helps to ensure high levels of employee participation. This planning should include:

- involving employees at all levels in the planning process,
- tailoring the program to the company and its work force,
- communicating the company’s commitment to the program and belief in its importance,
- providing a variety of options and developing incentives for employee participation,
- conducting periodic health assessments for employees to measure progress in achieving goals, and
- evaluating the program.

Employers have adopted a variety of incentives to encourage employee participation. Some employers are encouraging employee participation by allowing employees to use official company time to participate in these programs (72 percent of work sites allow this) and/or allow the use of flex-time (45 percent) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1993). Others pay a portion of the cost for employees to attend outside clinics to stop smoking or pay a higher percentage of medical expenses for employees who do not smoke or who regularly participate in an exercise program. Others set up competitions among employees, with prizes awarded to winners, or offer bonuses to employees who complete a specified number of hours of exercise.

Health promotion programs provide extra benefit options to employees through on-site or employer-owned fitness facilities, educational pamphlets or videos, and physical examinations. Depending on the program’s design, employees may pay a fee for participation in certain activities.

**Evaluating Health Promotion Programs**

Companies with health promotion programs generally report lower absenteeism rates, lower health care costs, and more productive and satisfied employees. Some companies evaluate their programs by comparing exercise program participants’ fitness with that of a control group, in terms of such factors as weight control, smoking cessation, elevated blood pressure, and the number of sick days used. However, in many cases data have not been collected over a long period of time. Some studies suggest that younger employees who are already fit, and who exercised regularly before joining a company program, are the ones
most likely to join and remain in employer-sponsored fitness programs.

To make a health promotion program cost effective, an employer must communicate the program to employees, encourage broad participation, and regularly assess the program’s effectiveness. Dropout rates can be high unless employers are innovative in their choice of programs and in the incentives they offer employees to participate. Health promotion programs can be valuable in providing early detection of health problems and offering employees the means to reduce the risks from such problems. As employers modify and tailor programs to their employees’ needs and desires, the programs’ potential to improve productivity and reduce health care costs may increase.

**Conclusion**

To establish whether health promotion programs can be credited with health care cost savings, employers and researchers must track a large number of employees over a long period of time. Regardless of the results, many employers believe that the mere existence of these programs is beneficial in that they demonstrate employers’ concerns for their employees and the value that they place on employees’ well-being and good health.

**Bibliography**


**Additional Information**

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