

# Workplace wellness

## Simple strategies to promote health in the workplace pays off in productive employees

By Heather Hudson

**H**ow healthy are your employees?

If your answer is, “It’s none of my business,” you could be missing an opportunity to foster more productive and happier staff.

In retail, people are often the cornerstone of a successful business. Healthy employees are known to be more effective in their jobs and able to provide better quality service, higher productivity and have a sense of pride in their workplace.

In the spirit of heart month, we’re exploring the idea of a healthy workplace and simple ways you can make your business a place to make active, healthy lifestyle choices that prevent disease and contribute to a better sense of wellbeing.

Then check out some of the most common conditions for Canadians and how you can prevent them.

### Benefits packages

Don’t underestimate the power of a comprehensive benefits package. Along with dental, vision and extended health care coverage, massage therapy, physiotherapy and treatment by practitioners such as psychologists, acupuncturists and chiropractors can contribute to the long-term health of all employees.

Even better, additional benefits such as gym memberships or a fitness allowance encourage a healthy, active lifestyle, which can help prevent illness that could lead to increased or extended absenteeism.

### Work/life balance

Ag-retailers are known for their homey, supportive environments. Though flexibility for shuttling kids to activities, taking time for regular health check-ups and vacation time seems to be the sensibility of many business owners, this kind of support actually goes a long way to ensuring healthy, happy employees.

Studies show that people who feel they have a good work/life balance have a lower risk for developing heart disease, depression, diabetes, asthma, migraines, ulcers and other conditions associated with stress.

### Employee education

Some companies offer regular electronic or paper newsletters that inform employees about current events in the organization. Often, these include informative articles or tips on leading a healthy lifestyle.

An easy and less formal way to distribute information is to make a commitment to send an email once a week containing a couple of health tips to think about. Or, put up a bulletin board to display health-related information in the lunch room or other high-traffic areas. People are more likely to read and absorb information as they’re waiting for their lunch to heat up or are standing in line to use a piece of equipment.

The Heart and Stroke Foundation’s website ([www.heartand-stroke.com](http://www.heartand-stroke.com)) is a good place to find printer-friendly information about disease prevention.

### Leading by example

Are powdery donuts and giant muffins a mainstay of your staff meetings? Is a day not complete without at least one coffee run? It’s easy to develop bad habits when everybody at work is doing it too.

To improve general health and prevent disease, you can make healthy eating just as routine as putting that extra spoonful of sugar in your tea. Some ideas include:

- Putting out a fruit or veggie tray once a week
- Installing a water cooler or putting a filter on the tap to encourage people to drink more water
- Have a potluck lunch once a week to which everyone must contribute something healthy
- Encourage staff to make time for lunch and regular snacks – skipping meals leads to lack of concentration, headaches, dizziness or blurred vision
- Paste a copy of the Canada Food Guide on the fridge or near the microwave to encourage people to make smart food choices
- Hire a nutritionist to make a presentation at a staff meeting, promoting health and smart food decisions

### Encouraging activity

If your business can’t support a fitness allowance or gym membership for employees, make activity part of the workplace culture.

Start a walking group at lunch or sanction a 15-minute power walk every afternoon to loosen muscles and relieve stress. (Trudging through snow gets the heart pumping even faster!) Poll staff to discover if there are common interests – maybe you could start a softball, volleyball or soccer team. To encourage employees to get 30 minutes of activity each day, hold a contest to see who can squeeze in the most time in a month. Distribute inexpensive pedometers to all staff to see who can achieve the highest number of steps.

To give you a head start on distributing health information to employees, here are two of the most common diseases in Canada and how they can be prevented.

### Heart disease

According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, 1.6 million Canadians have heart disease or are living with the effects of a stroke. The most common condition is coronary artery disease, which occurs when your heart's blood vessels become blocked or narrowed. Coronary artery disease can cause chest pains or a heart attack.

You can prevent heart disease by quitting smoking, exercising every day and eating a healthy diet low in saturated and trans fats, knowing your blood pressure and keeping it under control, and limiting alcohol and stress.

### Cancer

There are few people whose lives haven't been touched by cancer in some way.

Breast cancer - Breast cancer is the most common cancer in Canadian women besides non-melanoma skin cancer. Breast cancer accounts for approximately 15 per cent of all cancer deaths in Canadian women. In Canada, less than one per cent of all breast cancers occur in men; it is most commonly diagnosed in men over 60, but can be found in men of all ages.

Some factors that increase the risk of developing the disease include age (80 per cent of the cases of breast cancer occur in women over 50 years of age), family history, previous breast disorders with biopsies showing abnormal cells and a later than average menopause.

Prostate cancer - Prostate cancers start in the glandular tissue of the prostate, a gland in the male reproductive system. Prostate cancer is usually a slow growing disease. It accounts for about 11 per cent of all cancer deaths in men.

Factors that increase the risk of developing prostate cancer include age (particularly after 60 years of age when more than 80 per cent of cases occur) and family history of prostate cancer. Researchers are also looking into whether factors such as obesity, a diet high in fat and physical inactivity contribute to the development of the disease.

To reduce your risk of all types of cancer, the Public Health Agency of Canada recommends that you:

- Be a non-smoker and avoid second hand smoke
- Eat a healthy diet
- Reduce your exposure to charred meats
- Be physically active regularly
- Protect yourself from the sun
- Follow cancer screening guidelines (i.e. mammograms, clinical breast exams, Pap tests, testicular exams, prostate screening)
- Visit your doctor or dentist if you notice any change in your normal state of health
- Follow health and safety instructions at home and at work when using, storing and disposing of hazardous materials

The more information you and your staff have about your health, the more informed decisions you can make. Make it a regular topic of conversation in the workplace, encouraging people to make healthy choices.

The seasonal nature of the ag industry can make it tough to maintain health and fitness routines during the busy times. Rather than instituting a whole new regime, make one commitment at a time and stick with it by teaming up with other employees interested in improving their health.

You won't regret the investment. ♦

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