Healthy options
How nutrition and exercise can increase productivity and lower health care costs

In today's fast-paced world, eating properly and maintaining an exercise regimen can seem like luxuries rather than necessities. However, in the long run, taking the time to eat well-balanced meals and working out increases productivity and can help your company's bottom line.

“Having people take better care of themselves is one of the best ways of reducing the costs of health care coverage,” says Dr. David Heber, professor of medicine and director of the UCLA Center for Human Nutrition.

Heber spoke with Smart Business about the importance of nutrition and exercise in the workplace.

CEOs and other senior executives are constantly on the go, often skipping meals and not exercising. What dangers do these habits pose?

By not being active, many are losing muscle and putting on fat because they tend to eat the same of the amount of food that they ate before. Skipping meals doesn’t really help because your body tends to compensate later. Also, by skipping meals, you often don’t get the vitamins, minerals and protein that you need.

The end result is that your muscles go down and your fat goes up, usually around the middle.

This leads to a lot of serious problems. There is something called metabolic syndrome — which is high blood pressure, high blood fats and high blood sugar — that occurs in about 50 percent of people between the ages of 40 and 60 in the United States today.

These things can lead to heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and cancer.

How can this affect a CEO’s business?

One of the most common things with being overweight is lower back pain. This can lead to a lot of time away from work. Also, just being more tired during the day, and not being as effective mentally as you would be if you were in good shape, can make you less effective in your business and more easily irritable.

In the extreme, stress can lead to depression. The commonest form of depression is called atypical depression, and it usually results from unrelenting stress.

What can be done to change poor habits?

All you have to do is eat a healthier diet, which means a lot of colorful fruits and vegetables.

One of the things I find very helpful for executives, which I wrote about in my book called “The LA Shape Diet,” is to take a shake in the morning similar to what weightlifters used to take.

This would be made with soy protein, nonfat soy milk and frozen fruit in a blender. This is a great way to get 25 to 35 grams of protein. Then exercise about 30 minutes a day — this should include weightlifting and aerobic exercise. The important thing is to start out gradually and get advice from an exercise specialist.

From a business perspective, why is it so important that employees eat healthy?

The brain requires blood glucose, or sugar from food, and it also needs the protein that you find in foods.

So when people don’t eat, the No. 1 thing that happens is they become less energetic, less able to think clearly and less able to do their jobs.

Productivity will go down when you’re not eating properly and nutrition is very, very important for mental activity and to maintain productivity.

For people in business who have physical jobs, it’s even worse. Anyone who’s in a physical job requires very good nutrition or they’ll lose their muscles and possibly be injured.

What advice would you give to business owners about encouraging healthy habits at the workplace?

Encourage people to exercise every day. Many businesses actually put fitness facilities in their corporate headquarters, and others give employees a break on the local membership for a gym.

Since health care costs eventually come back to the employer — it’s estimated that about $130 billion a year in health care costs are related to overweight and inactivity — it really makes good business sense to promote healthy habits through your human resources department.

Certainly having healthy snacks available and having a healthy cafeteria choice available is also very important.

What type of cost efficiencies in health care coverage can be attained by proactive health habits?

The health care costs that can be saved are highly significant. It’s estimated that about 50 percent of diabetes associated with obesity can be prevented with diet.

A major study by National Institutes of Health showed a 58 percent reduction in new cases of diabetes over five years with just a very modest lifestyle and diet intervention with a 5 percent weight loss.

The progress of many diseases can be reduced, and if you just think about the cost per year for one person with Type 2 diabetes, it’s pretty staggering.

People with high cholesterol might spend $400 a month on a cholesterol drug.

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