Healthy at the top
Why screenings and executive physicals may save your life and your business

How are you doing? We’re asked that a dozen times a day. But if you’re a senior executive, you ought to stop and give the question some serious thought. It might just save your life — and your company.

“Burying your head in the sand about whether you have a problem, especially when many don’t have symptoms associated with them, doesn’t do you much good,” warns Dr. Benjamin Ansell, director of the Comprehensive Health Program at UCLA Medical Center in Los Angeles.

As part of UCLA's executive health program, Ansell has visited client companies such as Mattel Inc. to speak to executives about the importance of physicals and screenings. Going through the executive health program has some important benefits.

“If someone comes in and I find they’ve got prostate cancer or breast cancer, in a few moments I can have them in the chair of urology’s office or in the chief of breast cancer’s office,” Ansell says.

Smart Business spoke with Ansell about what executives need to know about their health.

What are some of the typical health problems executives are at risk for?

Executives are at the same type of risk as the general population [for cardiovascular disease, cancer and metabolic disorders such as diabetes]. However, stress tends to be more common in executive patients than in the general population.

Many of them actually have surprisingly excellent health practices in terms of exercise and diet. But many of them are forced by issues of travel or business functions to eat in an unhealthy way and to have a lack of exercise, sedentary lifestyle, long days and lack of sleep. These are all things that don’t help the health of an individual.

Why should a C-level executive be concerned?

We’re very aggressive in our program about looking for cardiovascular disease, and we find more problems than risk factors would necessarily predict in executives at all levels. And I think part of it has to be stress.

It’s hard to quantify stress, but I think stress is something of an X factor. When you look at the risk of high blood pressure or exercise or diet or weight or cholesterol in an individual, then see that it’s worse in somebody who’s carrying the weight of a company around his or her neck, you can’t help but feel that there’s some kind of stress multiple, if you will, of a given set of risks.

So the heads of these companies — and not just the officers but also the senior managers that have a lot of responsibility — end up taking some hits as a result of it.

All the things that we screen for, as critical and prevalent as they are, tend to have few or no symptoms associated with them until late in the process. Two-thirds of women and half of men who die from a heart attack have no symptoms before it. They have no clues unless you really look for a problem.

With virtually all types of cancer, by the time you develop symptoms, you’re typically way later in the process than we would like in terms of early detection and conservative treatment.

What’s the best way to be proactive?

It starts at the top. It starts with the CEO of a company saying: ‘This is our agenda. This is on the plate for all of us — this is important to me. I want this to be part of the culture of our company that you can take four or five hours to go do an executive physical. The company will not learn any information about your health, but we do want to know that you are being seen by top people.’

I know of a $200 million company where the CEO said to his people, ‘I want to know that every single one of you guys did this.’ He didn’t make it a condition of employment, but he might as well have, because every one of them went in and said, ‘Mr. X said to come in, so I’m coming in.’ That’s what I mean by starting at the top.

What are some simple ways that CEOs can promote a healthy workplace?

You can integrate education opportunities. I’ve personally gone to companies to address their health concerns. We can send a newsletter to companies about health in which you [the CEO] say that this is something you endorse.

The company should make it a covered benefit for their key management. You’d be amazed, despite what executives are making given their level in the bigger companies, that any out-of-pocket expense is a barrier to them actually doing it. So companies should just pay for it.

If you look at about $2,000 for a physical and cover it for maybe 25 to 30 people, $50,000 for a $200 million company to ensure the health of its senior leadership team, it’s a pretty small investment considering the cost and return associated with other perks. And it’s proportional to the company’s size. A company that’s doing $100 million may only have 10 people that it feels justify this type of expense.

It’s a way to retain people, too. You’re saying, ‘I don’t want to know about your health personally, but I do want you to know that your health is important to us.’

Dr. Benjamin Ansell
Director
UCLA Comprehensive Health Program