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Slimmer bottoms, fatter bottom lines

Jason Winebarger, an employee at Merle West Medical Center, works out at the center's exercise room. Employers are finding that keeping workers fit helps their business.

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As insurance costs and the national waistline swell, Klamath Falls employers are working overtime to help workers stay fit and healthy.

Some companies have on-site gyms or discounted rates to a private fitness club.

Some distribute pedometers that count the wearer's steps, and some measure out laps around the facility for a quick lunchtime walk.

Companies find that it's effective to tailor a program to their own size and to the kind of work their employees do.

But the bottom line is that keeping employees healthy helps the business.

Merle West Medical Center has been especially diligent in providing its employees fitness opportunities.

Reduced costs for insurance, workers compensation and sick leave are among the benefits that employers are looking for when they provide these benefits, said Doug Tofell, who manages Merle West's employee gym.

Tofell said improved morale and dedication are other factors Merle West looks for in a successful wellness program.

"These are harder to quantify, but just as important in the long run," he said.

After trying a couple of different approaches, hospital administrators came up with a program that rewards workers with cash for meeting and maintaining fitness goals.

About 180 employees participate in the program they designed, called Pro-Fit.

Tofell said 53 percent of participants are meeting their goals. About 26 percent aren't getting tested, though, and Tofell thinks the actual number of people meeting goals is probably higher.

Members of Pro-Fit fill out a healthy living questionnaire when they start the program and do a basic physical fitness test that measures flexibility, resting heart rate, blood pressure and body fat. The results are measured, and Tofell and the staff members set realistic goals, based on age and gender.

An employee who meets the goals can expect to see a bonus every six months that can range from \$45 to \$150. Some use the money to pay for their memberships at the fitness center, which cost \$15 a month.

Tofell said that the fees are reasonable compared to the cost of a private gym and serve as an incentive to employees, encouraging them to work out.

Bonnie Johnson, 57, is a medical technologist at Merle West. She has been a member of Pro-Fit for the past three years and said that it has been a good motivational tool.

"It gives me a benchmark, saying, 'You better pay attention to what you're doing,' " she said.

The incentive hasn't necessarily been the cash, she said, but the goals. Johnson also appreciates that the gym is open 24 hours a day, so no matter what shift she works, she always has access to a comfortable place to work out.

About 230 hospital employees use the fitness center. Tofell said that he and hospital administrators would both like to see that number go up - Merle West has about 1,000 employees - but high turnover makes it difficult to keep employees in the gym and program.

Jobs that have a higher risk factor for employees sometimes offer additional services.

Collins Products, a manufacturer of hardboard siding and particleboard, has a number of positions that demand a lot of employees physically. Collins has tried to combat work-related injury by having a chiropractor and massage therapists at the plant once a week on alternating weeks.

Chiropractor Greg Weidlich said that his massages are not just feel-good rubs. He tries to work out scar tissue that develops in muscle fibers due to repetitive or strenuous work. That scar tissue can put pressure on nerves and blood vessels, causing long-term problems such as carpal tunnel syndrome.

"I want to catch small things before they become big things," he said.

Weidlich stresses that the massage is part of a prevention and wellness program and that any serious problems get referred to a doctor. He estimates that 85 to 90 percent of the people he sees don't need additional treatment.

Collins, like many other businesses, also provides cholesterol and glucose testing and blood pressure screening. It also encourages participation in marathons and races, and it put together a company team to run in the Hood to Coast marathon. An on-site gym has cardiovascular and weight equipment. Collins, like Merle West, charges a minimal membership fee - \$10 a month for employees or \$15 for a family.

The Klamath County Health Department is in the tail-end of a wellness program that it borrowed from the American Cancer Society. The eight-week session, which is optional for employees, focuses on eating habits and fitness, said health department Health Educator Christa Pieper.

"If people are healthier they're going to be more efficient at work," Pieper said.

The health department was also the test group for a pedometer program that the county would like to spread to all its departments.

The county's risk management program bought the pedometers. They

are often used by employers to promote a healthy sense of competition between workers.

Jeld-Wen employees can also look forward to wearing pedometers as part of a wellness program the company will start next year, said Director of Health Benefits Paul Kaiser.

Oregon Institute of Technology Human Resources Director Shelby Wilsdon said that most of the fitness programs there are aimed at students, but faculty and staff members have access to the gym for \$16 a month. Radio station KLAD provides free memberships for employees to Klamath County Family YMCA.

Merle West Public Relations and Marketing Coordinator Tom Hottman says that Merle West is well on the road to finding what works for the hospital, but the key to any employee health and wellness program is to find one that gets to employees before they get sick. He is reasonably sure that Pro-Fit is a good way to do this.

"This gets right to the heart of prevention," he said.