

Healthy diet seen boosting worker productivity

Study finds obese employees twice as likely to take time off

[Reuters](#)

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WASHINGTON - That fast-food burger, monster take-out sandwich or bag of nutritional nothing you got from the vending machine at work does more than make you sluggish after lunch.

It's probably making your company less productive.

The global cost amounts to billions of dollars a year in lost productivity, considering that a diet loaded with fat and sugar puts workers at risk for diabetes and obesity-related illnesses, said Christopher Wanjek, who wrote the book on food in the workplace.

Obesity accounts for as much as 7 percent of total health costs in industrialized countries, Wanjek reported in "Food at Work," a review commissioned by the United Nations' International Labor Office.

Fat workers are twice as likely as fit workers to miss work. In the United States, the total cost attributable to obesity was \$99.2 billion in 1995, Wanjek wrote.

"We're not talking about polio. We're not talking about smallpox. Those diseases were hard to eradicate," Wanjek said. "We're talking about nutritional diseases. This should be a no-brainer. Provide access to better food, and the disease will go away."

There are solutions, but most require imagination and a bit of investment, Wanjek said in a Reuters interview.

One high-end example is Dole Food Co., which subsidized a healthy dining room for workers at its headquarters in Westlake Village, California, starting with an unlimited salad bar for \$1.50, free fruit snacks in the morning, free vegetable snacks in the afternoon and encouragement to go to the gym and exercise, alongside the company's chief.

After six months, tests on 60 volunteers found lower cholesterol, lower levels of certain proteins that are predictors of future heart disease, lower triglycerides and glucose levels, said Jennifer Grossman, director of the Dole Nutrition Institute.

"It really is in the company's best interests to do it, in addition to boosting morale," Grossman said by telephone.

Not every company can afford to do what Dole did, but U.S. health care giant Kaiser Permanente figured employees might eat more healthfully if local farmers set up stalls on the company's grounds. They turned out to be right.

"Location is everything," said Dr. Preston Maring, a physician who came up with the farm market plan. "If we put markets in the pathway that people normally walk, it's very hard to pass up a fresh peach in the middle of August."

Farm markets are a safe bet at Kaiser's northern California base, where local produce is easily available year-round, but Maring noted that the program has expanded to 24 locations around the United States. The company pays only for whatever government permits are required, he said.

There are innovative programs elsewhere, Wanjek reported:

- Healthy workplace canteens like the one at Husky Injection Molding Systems Ltd in Ontario, Canada, where red meat and deep-fried items are banned and three helpings of vegetables come with every meal;
- Training for street-food vendors in hygiene and food safety in South Africa, Tanzania and India;
- Subsidized meal vouchers for use at restaurants and food shops in Brazil, Hungary, Romania, France, Britain, Sweden, India, Lebanon and China.

Vicious cycle

The United Nations has been interested in worker nutrition for decades, but until now it focused on poor countries where the issue was getting enough food and clean water to employees, rather than heading off obesity.

"The whole issue of obesity, how it affected workers' health and productivity and how the workplace could become one of the ways of reaching people to combat obesity, had not been explored," the Geneva-based labor organization's William Salter said in answer to e-mailed questions.

Wanjek, himself a rail-thin 6-footer who makes a pot of soup each week and packages it to eat at work, described a vicious cycle based on poor nutrition in the workplace:

Poor nutrition leads to poor health, bringing on a lack of energy, strength and coordination and a lower learning potential, making for a poorly qualified job pool with lower productivity, resulting in a loss of competitiveness, higher business costs and lower investment and economic growth. In the end this brings about lower wages and then, again, poor nutrition for workers, Wanjek wrote.

At a recent Washington restaurant lunch, Wanjek had turtle soup with sherry, crispy fried fish and coleslaw and a few bites of sorbet for dessert.

Asked what place this kind of rich meal has in his examination of food at work, he demurred: "I have nothing to say about these expense-account lunches except that they eventually do you in, I'm sure."

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