Like thousands of other employers across the country, health care employers are often challenged with managing workforces impacted by physical, mental and financial difficulties associated with chronic health conditions.

According to a Medical Expenditure Panel Survey, over 50 percent of the U.S. population is living with a chronic condition such as diabetes, hypertension, obesity, heart disease or depression – all conditions that can result in a plethora of symptoms that might negatively impact an employee’s energy levels, mood and overall day-to-day quality of life.

Even though the mission of most health care professionals is to provide treatment and counsel to their patients on a day-to-day basis, they are, surprisingly, one of the most at-risk workforce populations when it comes to chronic conditions.

For example, a 2010 study from Truven Health Analytics looked at health risks and health care use among 740,000 hospital workers and their dependents and compared them with 25 million general workforce employees and dependents. The research found that hospital employees are more likely to be diagnosed with asthma, obesity and depression, and were 5 percent more likely to be hospitalized. These workers spent 9 percent more in health care costs than the general workforce and were found to have relatively poor eating habits.

The study also shows that rates of preventive screening – one of...
“By making their employees’ health as strategically important as patients’ health, health care organizations have the opportunity to create a culture of health that delivers measurable benefits…”

The solution

If your employees’ chronic health conditions are beginning to pose a threat to your organization’s short-term or long-term financial health, there is a solution: intervention and prevention.

There are three risk factors – tobacco use, physical inactivity and being overweight – that are linked to multiple chronic diseases and to injury. One effective intervention strategy can reduce the risk for multiple risk factors and chronic diseases.

A workplace wellness program that is tailored to the challenging schedules and stressful day-to-day work of health care workers is the ideal way to manage – and possibly prevent – these conditions.

One important success indicator for a wellness program is identifying the top barriers that prevent employees from making positive lifestyle behavior changes. The program should then be designed to address those barriers specific to the organization’s employees.

In a survey of hospitals, the most common barriers that employees cited as to why they did not achieve high levels of health after being screened were:
1. Don’t have time to go to the gym/visit doctors/take care of myself.
2. Can’t afford medications/healthy food/preventive care.
3. Too stressed about finances, family and other emotional stressors.

An investment in a well-designed wellness initiative that addresses these barriers head-on will improve the health of employees, as well as positively impact a hospital’s bottom line.

The measurable outcome

According to data collected from Interactive Health’s database of more than 2,000 clients, personalized worksite wellness programs significantly lower health care costs. For example, an employee who has been diagnosed with diabetes can cost an organization almost $15,000 per year in medical fees. However, if the organization can identify the condition at an early stage, the cost of treating a pre-diabetic employee over the course of one year is only $443. That’s a huge annual savings.

In addition to lowering costs, catching chronic conditions at an early stage is also crucial to reducing the complication risks and improving an employee’s quality of life.

For example, a client located in the Southeast region of the country had an employee population of over 2,600 workers who were extremely health challenged due to cultural lifestyle choices. Although the hospital offered a wellness program to its employees, it was managed internally with limited resources and was not generating results. The employee population consisted of large numbers of workers who struggled with chronic conditions such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease and high tobacco use.

The organization chose to partner to implement a wellness program that would strategically encourage healthier lifestyle changes among its employee population and offer the resources necessary to see significant change. A plan was established that would meet the client’s wellness objectives and also align with the organization’s overall business plan.

The program included an incentive design to promote participation and improve health outcomes with the ultimate goal of controlling health care costs and creating a strong culture of health. The employer provided programs and activities that addressed the workforce’s specific barriers to health improvement and worked to promote sustained behavior change through strong leadership support. The end results were impressive.

By offering program participants a 20 percent discount on health care premiums for improved health results, the organization saw a 50 percent reduction in tobacco use, 80 percent of those with hypertension improved and 60 percent with elevated blood glucose levels improved from 2012 to 2014. They also enjoyed high participation rates of over 70 percent in their yearly health evaluations and high engagement in their wellness activities.

How you can achieve wellness program success

Based on the data collected from years of working with health care clients across the country, we have found the
secret to increasing the success rate of
wellness programs comes down to a few
basic steps:

**Step 1 Communication**

This is where C-suite level
executives and HR leaders play a very
important role. The genuine backing of
a wellness program through company
leadership has been proven to vastly
increase the number of employees who
participate in a wellness initiative. By
actively promoting and participating
in the wellness program activities
themselves, company executives and
HR leaders reinforce to employees
that creating a culture of wellness is
important to the company and that
each employee’s health is valued.

**Step 2 Identification and stratification**

A comprehensive wellness initiative begins with gathering data to help you
identify key health risks.

Data such as demographics,
biometrics, labs, health assessment
and claims information can be
important elements to customizing
a wellness strategy for the employer,
as well as creating a personalized
program for the employee that
is intrinsically motivating.

For example, data can be gathered
in a variety of ways and from a
variety of sources, which can include
a comprehensive health evaluation
that utilizes testing technology and
incorporates personalized testing
based on risk.

**Step 3 Employee engagement**

Generating and sustaining
employee engagement in wellness
programs is often the biggest
challenge in achieving overall
success. Timeliness of interventions,
personalization, convenience and confidentiality are important
considerations to drive increased
employee engagement, especially in a
health care environment.

Providing activities in different
modalities — online, print and in
person – allow an individual to engage
in different ways that are meaningful
for them. For example:

- Healthy food offerings available in
  vending machines and cafeterias
- Smoke-free campus
- Walking paths and access
to exercise facilities
- Work-life balance policies
- Incentives designed to foster
  participation and intrinsic
  motivation
- Easy access to benefits and resources
  that are integrated (EAP, DM, health
coaching, pharmacy benefits, etc.)
- Utilize the resources that are
  already available in the health
  system and infuse them in
your wellness program
- Align the wellness program
  with the health care system's
  mission statement
- Create a strong wellness
  champion network to help foster
your wellness initiatives
- Have a strong communications
  strategy
- Reward for positive health outcomes

**Step 4 Measure outcomes**

As data and analytics become more
sophisticated, health care employers
and HR leaders are now able to use
the insights from this vast amount
of knowledge to offer more accurate,
targeted benefit options that can
continuously evolve to meet the needs
of a changing workforce.

Reporting and data analytics are
central to assessing and measuring
results and should be used to
benchmark progress and adjust or
realign your wellness program. Data
can identify key components in your
program that may need to be redesigned
to help drive improved health outcomes.
Possible uses include:

- Enhanced health plan design
- Adjustments in communications
- Adjustments in incentive strategy
- Modifications in wellness plan
design/strategy
- Identification of additional
resources needed

By making employees’ health as
strategically important as patients’
health, health care organizations have
the opportunity to create a culture of
health that delivers measurable benefits
such as better health for individuals
and a healthier bottom line for the
organization. A results-driven wellness
program can be the foundation for this
positive change.

——

Jane Ruppert, RDN, LDN, CDE, is
vice president of health services at
Interactive Health. She can be reached
at j.ruppert@interactivehealthinc.com.

**Sources**

- Centers for Disease Control and
Prevention. (2009). Chronic Diseases:
The Power to Prevent, the Call to Control.
- Medical Expenditure Panel Survey, 2006
in Anderson, G. (2010). Chronic Care:
Making the Case for Ongoing Care. Robert
Wood Johnson Foundation. [www.rwjf.org/pr/product.jsp?id=56888](www.rwjf.org/pr/product.jsp?id=56888)