

# Benefits Spotlight

News for *You*. News to *Share* with your Employees.

## Are Employee Wellness Programs Worth the Investment?

Employers nowadays are thinking creatively about ways to attract new employees and keep their current employees engaged. One of the offerings companies are turning to is employee wellness programs. These are programs designed to help employees recognize unhealthy lifestyle habits, such as stress, inactivity, lack of quality sleep and poor diet, in an effort to cultivate a healthier and happier workforce.

Employee wellness programs run a wide spectrum: Some might have a single component (fill out a health assessment each year and get a gift card), while others are more involved (year-round challenges, gym access, informative wellness sessions and biometric screenings that come with hefty incentives like cash or insurance premium allowances that encourage employees to participate).

If you're considering adding an employee wellness program at your company, you likely have many questions. The biggest of which may be, "are they worth the investment?"

Here, we'll share a snapshot of employee wellness programs to help you make an informed decision.

### Thinking About Establishing a Wellness Program? You're Not Alone

The 2019 Kaiser Family Foundation's annual survey of employers (the latest one available based on the publishing of this article) found that, "Most large firms and many small firms have programs that help workers identify health issues and manage chronic conditions, including health risk assessments, biometric screenings, and health promotion programs."<sup>1</sup>

Health Risk Assessments	Biometric Screenings	Health and Wellness Promotion Programs
<i>Definition:</i> Questionnaire on an individual's medical history, health status, and lifestyle	<i>Definition:</i> A live health exam that takes measurements on common risk factors, such as cholesterol, blood pressure and body mass index (BMI)	<i>Definition:</i> Programs aimed at helping employees understand and address unhealthy behaviors and adopt healthy habits
Small firm use: 41% Large firm use: 65%	Small firm use: 26% Large firm use: 52%	Small firm use: 50% Large firm use: 84%

Source: The Kaiser Family Foundation's Employer Health Benefits 2019 Annual Survey

## Do Employee Wellness Programs Work?

Few studies have been able to definitively show that employee wellness programs are worth the investment from cost savings and employee health improvement standpoints. However, most studies have been limited in terms of the length of study and relatively small size. The big takeaway is that more research needs to be done to truly understand the true benefits (or lack thereof) of employee wellness programs.

One 2019 study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) does help shed some light. This larger study focused on a major retailer that employed nearly 33,000 workers in 160 locations. The researchers had 20 of the locations offer an employee wellness program, and 140 locations did not offer a program.<sup>2</sup>

The wellness program included in the study had several components: a health assessment, medical testing (such as blood pressure) and classes on lifestyle and wellness topics. In return for participating, the employees in the wellness program received, in total, about \$250 worth of incentives, such as gift cards.<sup>2</sup>

The researchers evaluated the effect of the wellness program after 18 months. Employees in the wellness program said they engaged in healthier behaviors (such as exercising or managing stress) compared with those who weren't in the wellness program.<sup>2</sup>

But the wellness programs did not change the medical measurements of the participants, such as blood pressure levels. The programs also didn't reduce how much the employer spent on health care costs or employee work absences.<sup>2</sup>

The 2019 JAMA study isn't intended to say that wellness programs don't work. One of the main questions is whether an 18-month study duration isn't enough time to fully allow for behavior change among an employee base. Another question is whether the incentives provided by the employer were large enough to encourage participation and meaningful change among the employee base.

## Some Questions to Ask About Wellness Programs

If you're embarking on establishing an employee wellness program at your company, these are a few questions you should consider:

- What does the company hope to gain or learn by offering an employee wellness program (eg, reduced cost, higher employee morale, etc.)?
- What are the key programs you'd like to offer initially?
- How do you plan to communicate the employee wellness program to prospective and existing employees?
- What incentives will the company offer to encourage employees to participate in the wellness program?
- Who will be the company's partner in crafting the employee wellness program?
- How will you track the success of your program?
- How will you reevaluate the program, and how often?

## The Bottom Line

Employee wellness programs are not a magic bullet to lowering your company's health care costs, improving productivity or lowering absenteeism. However, these programs have been found to attract employees with an existing interest and dedication to their personal health, and these employees often have lower medical expenses than those who don't prioritize their health. These wellness initiatives also tell your employees that you care about their health — and that's a powerful message.

If you're interested in establishing or enhancing your company's employee wellness offerings, contact your Delta Dental of Iowa Sales Representative about ways to incorporate dental wellness into your program.

### REFERENCES:

1. <https://files.kff.org/attachment/Report-Employer-Health-Benefits-Annual-Survey-2019>
2. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/2730614>

### SOURCE:

<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/04/16/713902890/how-well-do-workplace-wellness-programs-work>

## How to Keep Your Tongue Clean (and Why You Should)

Brush your teeth, floss, rinse with mouthwash...brush your tongue? Another oral health habit to keep up with?

Here's the deal: The tongue harbors a lot of bacteria in your mouth. A quick brush is an easy way to keep that bacteria under control. It's a simple add-on to your routine that delivers some big benefits.

Before we get into how to clean your tongue, we'll explain why it's so important to do it in the first place.

### Benefits of Cleaning Your Tongue Each Day

When it comes to the most common dental health problems, including cavities, gum disease and bad breath, a buildup of bacteria is often to blame. And bacteria like to live on your tongue. This is because your tongue is bumpy, rough and damp — an ideal environment for bacteria to grow. When bacteria is building up on your tongue, you might see a white coating over your tongue's surface.

Regularly cleaning your tongue will reduce the amount of bacteria on its surface. Less bacteria means that you'll have less bad breath, reduced plaque and an all-around fresher feeling mouth.

## **Benefits of a Once-Monthly Tongue Self-Check**

While we're on the subject of paying more attention to your tongue, it's a good idea to check your tongue each month for any new bumps, sores, bleeding, discoloration or anything that looks out of the ordinary.

Your dentist does this at each of your twice-yearly preventive visits, but it's a good idea for you to take a look as well. Most tongue issues are easily treatable and not critical, but they could be linked to oral cancer. Detecting any issues early could save your life.

If you notice anything different about your tongue during a check, or if you're feeling pain or changes in how your tongue moves, give your dentist a call. He or she will help get to the bottom of the issue and provide peace of mind.

## **How to Clean Your Tongue**

Cleaning your tongue can fit easily into your current dental health routine. Put a small amount of toothpaste on your tongue and gently brush over the whole surface. Rinse with mouthwash or some water.

You can also buy special tools to clean your tongue, called tongue scrapers. These can help effectively clean your tongue, but they aren't necessary. Cleaning with your toothbrush and toothpaste will work fine to limit bacteria and keep your mouth fresh and healthy.