The Skinny on Obesity

The epidemic is here and all signs point to it getting worse. Here’s why employers need to sink their teeth into an obesity solution.

There was a time—not too long ago—when people could smoke on planes. Or when it seemed true that diners in the non-smoking section of a restaurant were not affected by the smoke a few tables away. Today, many of us smile at the naiveté of those old habits. In the past decade, studies have repeatedly shown that smoking directly impacts one’s health and can cause premature death. Now, new research is shedding light on the effects of obesity and it turns out it’s as bad as smoking—or maybe even worse.

In an article published earlier this year in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine,
researchers from Columbia University found that obesity has become an equal, if not greater, contributor to disease and the shortening of life expectancy than smoking. Another study from the University of Oxford looked at mortality over 10 to 15 years in North America and Europe. The researchers found that those with a body mass index (BMI) of 30 to 35 died three years earlier than their leaner counterparts. People with a BMI over 40 or more lost about 10 years.

The economic weight of obesity
Like smoking, obesity has a negative impact on a variety of functions in the body. It increases the risk of hypertension, heart disease and stroke, type 2 diabetes, sleep apnea, osteoarthritis and many forms of cancer. This represents a significant economic burden on Canada’s healthcare system. In 2005, the Public Health Agency of Canada said that obesity-related chronic conditions accounted for $4.3 billion ($1.8 billion in direct and $2.5 billion in indirect) costs—a figure that may be an underestimation of the total costs of excess weight in Canada. In the U.S., obesity now carries the price tag of US$147 billion per year in direct medical costs, which is just over 9% of all medical spending, according to a recent report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Another area of considerable loss is in the workforce. A 2008 study from Karolinska Institute in Stockholm found that obese people were less likely to be as upwardly mobile—meaning they don’t reach their economic potential as employees—than normal weight individuals. And in 30% of cases, they were downwardly mobile. Newer research is uncovering connections between obesity and other chronic conditions, such as mental health issues.

To compound matters, obesity in Canada is on the rise at an alarming rate. According to Statistics Canada, in 2008, 23% of Canadians 18 or older had BMIs greater than 30, meaning they were moderately to severely obese. But this year, a report from the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada found that between 1994 and 2005, obesity increased by 18% for the overall population. For those aged 35 to 49, obesity jumped by 20%. In the U.S., between 1998 and 2006 obesity rates increased 37% and now one in three adults in the country are obese. What’s even more worrisome is that more and more younger people have expanding waistlines. In the Heart and Stroke Foundation report, the organization found that about 2.5 million Canadians aged 20 to 34 are obese. About 16% of children aged 10 to 17 are obese in the U.S. Younger people will carry the weight and the additional health problems for much longer than older generations. This will lead to further and more serious weight-related health risks in the years to come.

Is there a role for employers?
Employers cannot sit back and ignore these trends. The obesity epidemic is here and appears to be getting worse. Like smoking cessation programs, there is an opportunity for employers to intervene and help employees become healthier and lead longer, more productive lives. A 2007 U.S. survey from Nationwide Better Health discovered that more than one third of employees are stuck at their desks for most of the day and 38% of workers eat badly because of work stress. On a more positive note, 66% would take advantage of gym memberships, nutrition education or weight management programs if provided by their employer.

To battle obesity, it appears there needs to be interventions on multiple levels. Employers need to support healthy eating habits with both better food choices and nutrition education as well as encourage daily activity and provide tools on stress management. Obesity is a complicated condition and employees need your help. Perhaps the time has come to change our approach to eating habits like we did so successfully with smoking.