

Focus on Men's Health Worth Employer's While

As the health care industry seeks to lower the nation's escalating health care costs, employers and health plans often examine key issues such as rates of chronic disease within certain employee populations, medical and pharmacy costs per disease category, among others.

Over the years, plan sponsors have also begun to pay more attention to diseases that affect women—such as heart disease—and what can be done to improve health and outcomes for this vital employee population.

While it's a crucial effort for employers and plan sponsors, it's also important to focus on another population: men.

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Men's Rates of Disease Different

Unfortunately, while disease rates of men and women are equalizing, men still have higher death rates than women. The top 10 causes of death, including heart disease, cancer, and stroke, still affect men more than women. In addition:

- Men are more likely to have high cholesterol. Testosterone is linked to elevations of LDL, the bad cholesterol, and declines in HDL, the good cholesterol.
- According to the American Heart Association, men are at a higher risk of heart attacks than women and suffer them at an earlier age. In addition, men have about 1.5 times the death rate from cardiovascular diseases as women.
- More than 70% of men over 20 are overweight. Weight is a key indicator in a host of chronic diseases that can dramatically impact employer health care costs, ranging from hypertension and diabetes to high blood pressure and heart disease.
- Men are four times as likely to commit suicide as women. Depression in men often goes undiagnosed because men are less likely to seek help.

Looking at Productivity Costs

While poor health and reduced productivity affects all levels of an enterprise, a study published this spring in the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* revealed

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that executives—many of whom are male—seem to suffer high productivity loss from presenteeism related to specific health conditions.

Developing programs better tailored for the needs and concerns of men can lead to increased productivity and lower health care costs for employers. However, finding ways to reach the male population can be a challenge. Studies show that men are less likely to seek help, undergo annual physicals, or follow medication regimens. In addition, because some men find traditional disease management programs intrusive and time-consuming, they are often uncomfortable or unwilling to participate.

A new, more individualized health management model may overcome that obstacle—personal health support (PHS). The PHS model focuses on the “whole” person, not just the illness, condition, or risk factor. As a result, it is more likely to reach and impact those individuals who have failed to respond to more traditional standardized interventions.

What Employers Can Do

Successful programs help male employees identify those health-related issues they are willing to address and provide them the support necessary to reach desired goals. Comprehensive wellness programs—those that offer convenient, private, and tailored support via phone, Internet, or other convenient access by qualified health coaches—may provide a better way to help men with chronic diseases become healthier.

Male employees may not be willing immediately to change their diets or stop smoking. However, with the support of a health coach, they may commit to daily brief walks, or perhaps visits to the gym.

Once even minor successes are attained, coaches can work with employees to identify the next milestone, such as greater health concerns related to smoking or weight. **CDHC**

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