

Company wellness programs improve health, cut costs



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CHANTILLY, Virginia (CNN) -- Employee wellness programs just may be the cure for companies struggling to keep up with rapidly rising health care costs.

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And proponents say that in addition to saving companies money, the programs are an effective way to help employees live healthier lives.

Jeff and Linda Pond of Virginia even suggest that Linda's company wellness program may have saved Jeff's life.

Two years ago, Pond received a letter informing him that his annual blood test results indicated he might have prostate cancer. The letter advised him to consult his physician.

Pond is now six weeks out of surgery to treat early stage prostate cancer and says things are "back to normal," thanks to Linda's employee wellness program at Quest Diagnostics, which provided the free blood tests that initially detected signs of cancer.

"My cancer would have gone undetected for years, and likely wouldn't have been nearly as treatable as it is," Pond said, adding that early detection saved him from having to go through more intensive -- and expensive -- treatments down the road.

It is this concept of preventative care that spurred the CEO of Quest Diagnostics -- where Linda works as a registered nurse -- to implement the company's wellness program four years ago, said Steve Burton, vice president of health and wellness services at Quest Diagnostics.

The company's voluntary program, Healthy Quest, provides employees, their spouses and domestic partners with a personalized health report -- called Blueprint for Wellness -- based on laboratory testing. The program also provides educational materials, weight-loss support groups, fitness classes, a smoking cessation program and personal counseling sessions. Employees who participate in the free program are given \$10 bi-weekly as an incentive, Burton said. VideoWatch how the wellness program works »

So what's in it for the company?

Healthy Quest is designed to focus on health issues that “drive a lot of costs, and drive a lot of lost productivity,” like obesity, smoking and stress, Burton said. Since Healthy Quest was established, the company has benefited from lower health care costs, fewer sick days and more satisfied employees, he said.

“Through an independent researcher, we determined that for about every dollar that we invest behind Healthy Quest, there’s a savings of about \$4.80,” Burton said.

Though a causal relationship has not been definitively proven, “there is accumulating evidence that these wellness programs are saving employers money,” said LuAnn Heinen, vice president of the National Business Group on Health. The NBGH is a non-profit organization that advises its member companies on health care issues.

And as health care costs continue to rise, more employers -- especially large companies -- are turning to wellness programs as a way to potentially help the bottom line.

According to the Kaiser Foundation’s Employer Health Benefits 2008 Annual Survey, average premiums for employer-sponsored health insurance for family coverage increased 119 percent between 1999 and 2008.

The report, which surveyed randomly selected public and private firms, also found that more employers are turning to employee wellness programs -- more than half of the small and large firms that offered employee health benefits also offered some form of a wellness program.

“Companies have come to believe that being healthier will result in using less health care, and have the added benefit of more productive employees,” Heinen said.

Nonetheless, some employees are skeptical about giving their employer access to such personal information.

Confidentiality can be tricky, Heinen said, especially when companies rely on third-party entities to administer the wellness programs and provide feedback to employees.

But with proper communication between the employer and the employee, as well as health privacy laws in place, Heinen said employees should be able to feel confident that their personal information will be protected.

“I often have that conversation with people,” said Linda Pond, who also serves as the volunteer health promotions team leader of Healthy Quest at Quest Diagnostic’s Nichols Institute in Chantilly, Virginia. “I let them know that this is a very confidential program. Their information is not shared with anyone.”

Pond also emphasized that the program is completely voluntary, so employees who do not feel comfortable sharing their information do not have to participate.

It seems, though, that the majority of Quest Diagnostics employees are satisfied with the program. Burton said the employee response to Healthy Quest has been positive -- about 66 percent of the company’s employees signed up for Blueprint for Wellness last year.

The success of programs like Healthy Quest has also caught the attention of lawmakers working to pass a health care reform bill.

The Affordable Health Choices Act, approved by the Senate HELP Committee this July, includes provisions for a marketing campaign to “make employers ... aware of the benefits of employer-based wellness programs ...

[and] establish a culture of health by emphasizing health promotion and disease prevention.”

The bill also provides “technical assistance, consultation, [and] tools” to help employers evaluate the effectiveness of their programs.

This additional government support may be especially valuable to smaller companies that are trying to establish wellness programs, Heinen said, emphasizing that even smaller programs can be beneficial.

Not all businesses have the resources that Quest Diagnostics and other large companies have to sustain intensive wellness programs, but even small things can make a difference in helping employees to be healthier, she said.

“Be creative and look in your community for support. Open stairwells, make sure you don’t just have junk food in the vending machines, start walking programs, anything you can do to remove obstacles,” Heinen said.

Once a company finds a workable formula for a well-run, self-sustaining wellness program, the benefits to both the employer and the employee will be evident, Heinen said.

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Linda Pond agrees.

“It’s a win-win situation,” Pond said. “[Healthy Quest] has made a profound difference in our lives. They’ve given me my husband for many years to come.”