

Keeping holidays healthy

How to create a healthy holiday season **Interviewed by Amy Borghese**

During the season of giving, employers often like to thank their employees with treats and indulgences. The holiday season is often filled with sweet treats and parties. While this may seem like a nice gesture from an employer, it can lead to long-term weight gain and health problems.

Americans on average gain one to two pounds during the holiday season. This may not seem like a big concern for one year, but over five years, it means you could gain five to 10 pounds, says Wendy Wigger, director of wellness for Priority Health. Such weight gain can contribute to more serious health-related problems. It can often be difficult for employers to maintain a healthy work environment, but it is crucial to help employees maintain healthy lifestyles. Employers should strive to design an environment and plans that work for all members of their staff and that lead to successful outcomes, says Wigger.

Smart Business spoke with Wigger about ideas for keeping employees healthy during the holiday season and the importance of setting realistic health goals.

How can an employer help employees maintain healthy lifestyles during the holiday season?

- Celebrate after the holidays. The holiday season can be very stressful. Employers need to realize that employees are trying to fit many more activities into their 24-hour day. If an employer is opting to host a holiday celebration to thank its employees, it may choose to have it after the first of the year when employees have more time and will enjoy the celebration more.

- Offer on-site seminars or exercises for employees. These may include lessons on stress management, balancing life and family and depression designed to help employees during the stressful time of the year.

- Don't center the holidays around food. Try to avoid parties that focus on food and drink. There are other social



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event options that do not make food the central focus. Some companies choose to adopt a family for the holidays and work together to collect items, socialize and give back to the community.

- Offer healthy options. If you choose to have a more traditional holiday party, offer healthy options as well as the sweet treats. This gives your employees the opportunity to practice smart eating decisions while including them in the celebration.

How can individuals maintain their workout routines during the hectic holiday season?

- Carve out personal time. We are so inclined to give, give, give during the holidays that we usually end up at the end of our own list and do not make time to exercise and maintain healthy lifestyles.

- Set realistic exercise goals during the holidays. You may have to adjust your schedule to fit in the exercise required to maintain a healthy lifestyle. This may mean that you cannot walk 30 minutes on a treadmill, but with conscious efforts, you may be able to break up that cardio routine into 10-minute intervals that you

complete while shopping or running errands for the holidays.

- Enlist the help of a friend. If you have someone trying to stay on track with you, it may be easier to avoid temptations and complete your exercise routine.

- Exercise before the chaos starts. If you exercise first thing in the morning, you are less likely to be distracted later in the day or have something important come up that distracts you from your routine.

Are there any programs that employers can implement during the holidays to help employees?

Employers may offer incentives to employees for living a healthy lifestyle during the holidays. Again, this is only effective if realistic goals are set. Such programs need not focus on employees losing weight during the holidays; rather they can focus on employees maintaining their current weight. You can offer incentives to the employees who maintain their weight or only gain a pound. You want to design programs that are meaningful to the individuals, and support them with resources to change behaviors. These programs should be set up for success.

Employers can provide their staff with a healthy holiday shopping list. When people do last-minute shopping, they often overspend and make poor choices. If they have a healthy shopping list in hand, they may pick healthier gifts for their loved ones and spend less in the long run.

When should individuals start implementing a healthy lifestyle?

There is never a wrong time to start implementing a healthy lifestyle. Don't wait until the holidays are over and pile up the food and calories in the meantime. Start simple. During the holidays, do little things such as walking more, drinking more water and exercising whenever possible. Outline a healthy lifestyle plan and put it into practice. <<

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