The Bad News: The prevalence of obesity among us (adult Americans) doubled in a little more than 20 years (1980-2004). Current estimates are that one third of us are now overweight (have a Body Mass Index between 25 and 29.9) and another third are obese (BMI 30 or higher).¹

We are also much more aware, as a result of widespread publicity campaigns, that being either obese or overweight increases our risk for many chronic diseases, including heart disease, diabetes, certain cancers, and stroke.² Using 2006 data that compared medical expenses for normal weight and obese people nationwide, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) concluded that people who were obese spent 42% more for medical care.³

The Good News: The situation is not being overlooked. The CDC has created a new website in response to organizations wanting to know how to address the problem of obesity among employees. LEANWorks! is a general guide to developing an obesity prevention and control program in a workplace. It also describes interventions that show promise in helping employees lose weight.⁴

The CDC’s National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion took a comprehensive approach in its “Recommended Community Strategies and Measurements to Prevent Obesity in the US” that was issued last July.⁵ Some of those recommendations sound applicable to the workplace:

- increasing the availability of foods and beverages with low sugar, fat, and sodium content (the report’s special focus on consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages was related to the risk of obesity for children and adolescents)
- creating more opportunities for physical activity
- reducing “screen time,” which in the report meant children in front of television screens but could certainly apply to office workers and computer screens as well
- forming partnerships/coalitions to address obesity

NOTE: Companies are also aware of the need for sensitivity when planning weight-related wellness programs, so that employees feel they are being helped rather than punished.⁶,⁷ But with sufficient involvement of employees in program planning, they may feel grateful that an employer is playing a role in helping them achieve their health goals.

1 - The BMI is a measure of weight scaled according to height. Calculate Your Body Mass Index - www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi/


3 – Health Affairs – “Annual Medical Spending Attributable To Obesity: Payer-And Service-Specific Estimates” - http://content.healthaffairs.org/cgi/content/abstract/28/5/w822?maxtoshow=&HITS=10&hits=10&RESULTFORMAT=&fulltext=Annual+Medical+Spending+Attributable+To+Obesity&andorexactfulltext=and&searchid=1&FIRSTINDEX=0&resourcetype=HWCIT

4 – CDC - www.cdc.gov/leanworks/index.html

5 – CDC-MMWR report - www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5807a1.htm
