



1st Step to Wellness: Eliminating Health Risk Factors

The best employee wellness programs provide tools and resources to help participants make changes that can improve their overall health. But before your employees can make changes, they must be educated about the changes that are most needed.

Start your wellness program by defining your participants' current health status. Wellness experts recommend a focus on five key health risk factors. In combination, these five factors are known as Metabolic Syndrome.

Do Your Employees Have Metabolic Syndrome?

About 47 million adults in the United States (almost 25 percent) have metabolic syndrome, a condition that may soon overtake smoking as the leading risk factor for heart disease.

Metabolic syndrome is the name for a group of risk factors that increase the likelihood of heart disease and other health problems, such as diabetes and stroke. Employees with three or more of the following risk factors would be diagnosed with Metabolic Syndrome.

- 1. High waist measurement**
 - 35 inches or more for women
 - 40 inches or more for men
- 2. High triglyceride level of 150 mg/dL or more**
- 3. Low HDL (good) cholesterol level**
 - Less than 50 mg/dL for women
 - Less than 40 mg/dL for men
- 4. Blood pressure of 130/85 or more**
- 5. High fasting blood sugar of 100 mg/dL or more**

Any one of these risk factors can develop alone, but they tend to occur together. These risk factors all increase the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and stroke, and the more risk factors a person has, the higher the likelihood he / she will develop one of these health conditions. In general, a person with metabolic syndrome is twice as likely to develop heart disease and five times as likely to develop diabetes as someone who doesn't have metabolic syndrome.

Therefore, employees with metabolic syndrome risk factors will likely be the highest utilizers of your employee benefit plan. Anything you can do to reduce or eliminate their risk factors will have a positive impact on their health and your healthcare expenses.

Prevent and Reverse Metabolic Syndrome with Employee Wellness Programs

It is possible to prevent or delay metabolic syndrome, mainly with lifestyle changes. In fact, all of these risk factors can potentially be eliminated. However, laboratory analysis of blood is the only way to identify high triglycerides, low HDL cholesterol, or high fasting blood sugar. Blood draws also provide baseline figures by which progress and improvement can be measured.

Once risk factors are identified, employees should be encouraged to make realistic short and long-term goals. Work closely with your wellness programming provider and plan for employees to seek regular medical care during the process.

Personalized coaching and peer support groups have been shown to positively affect wellness programming outcomes. For the best results, identify high-risk employees and then provide the necessary health tools that will allow them to get control of their own health.

When you help employees eliminate Metabolic Syndrome risk factors, they'll thank you for it – and you'll gain the advantage of reduced healthcare costs, decreased employee absenteeism, and a happier, healthier workforce.

Adapted from the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute's "Metabolic Syndrome" page.

Original available at http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/dci/Diseases/ms/ms_what.html