Obesity in the workplace: a weighty issue?

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can't make it in today
Health and Work
Managing health at work for employers

131m working days are lost to sickness absence every year

4.4 days are lost on average for each worker due to sickness absence

42% of employees experience at least one period of sickness absence in a year

7% of employees take periods of sickness absence lasting 2 weeks or more

Main causes for lost working days in 2013
- Musculoskeletal conditions: 31m days
- Minor illnesses (coughs and colds): 27m days
- Stress, anxiety or depression: 15m days

1 in 3 of employees with a long term health condition have not discussed it with their employer

Employers spend £9bn each year on sick pay and associated costs

Costs of presenteeism (attending work while ill) are estimated to be £30bn annually

52% of employees report having access to occupational health through their work

Percentage of hours lost to sickness in 2013
- Private sector: 1.8%
- Public sector: 2.9%

39% report having access to independent counselling

Health and Work

Health of UK employees

- 1 in 4 of UK employees reported having a physical health condition.
- 1 in 5 of those employees with physical health conditions also reported having a mental health condition.
- 1 in 3 of current UK employees have a long-term health condition.
- 1 in 8 of current employees reported having a mental health condition.
- 1 in 10 employees reported having musculoskeletal conditions.
- 42% of employees with a health condition felt their condition affected their work ‘a great deal’ or ‘to some extent’.

Employees with mental and physical health comorbidity were much more likely to see their health as affecting work:

- 29% were affected ‘a great deal’ compared to
- 13% of those with a physical condition only and
- 15% of those with a mental health condition only.

An unhealthy workforce hurts the UK's economy and society due to lost productivity, reducing income tax receipts, increases in long-term sickness and increased healthcare costs. Better management of employee health can minimise these costs.

The costs to the taxpayer — benefit costs, additional health costs and forgone taxes — are estimated to be over £60bn annually.

The combined costs of sickness absence, lost productivity through worklessness, and health-related productivity losses, are estimated to be over £100bn annually. This is greater than the current annual budget for the NHS and equivalent to the entire GDP of Portugal.

Sources: Black, 2008
Why is obesity an issue?

- Leads to severe health complications.
- Type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, strokes, cancer and asthma = increased NHS expenditure.
- 1 in 10 adults at risk of diabetes by 2035, 90% of cases are due to obesity.
- Require greater days off work as a result of these health complications.
- Study at Virginia Tech and University of Buffalo suggests obese workers are less productive.
- Mental health problems – low self-esteem and depression affects work ethic.
What does the future look like?

It is likely that by 2025 40% of adults will be obese, and the number of people living and working with chronic conditions will rise steadily, affecting morale, competitiveness, profitability.

In an increasingly competitive global economy, only the healthiest businesses will prosper. Companies that invest to support employees’ health will be fitter to survive.

Retire at 68? Three-quarters of us will be too ill to even work that long...
Overweight and obesity among adults
Health Survey for England 2010-2012

More than 6 out of 10 men are overweight or obese (66.5%)

More than 5 out of 10 women are overweight or obese (57.8%)

Adult (aged 16+) overweight and obesity: BMI $\geq 25$kg/m$^2$
Obesity among adults
Health Survey for England 2010-2012

One out of four men is obese (24.7%)

One out of four women is obese (25.7%)

Adult (aged 16+) obesity: BMI ≥ 30kg/m²
Adult waist circumference

Health Survey for England

Year of survey
Mean waist circumference (cm)
% with raised* waist circumference

Adults aged 16+ years

1993
82 cm
27%

2012
88 cm
46%

1993
93 cm
21%

2012
97 cm
34%

* Raised waist circumference is taken to be greater than 102 cm in men and greater than 88 cm in women
% with raised waist circumference is a three year average for 1993-95 and 2010-12

Patterns and trends in adult obesity
Physical affects of obesity on the human anatomy

- Breathlessness
- Non Communicable Diseases – heart, cancer etc.
- Struggling to do normal physical activity
- Joint pain and back pain
- Sleeplessness
- Skin complaints
Psychological affects of obesity on a person

Obesity can affect a person mentally as well as physically, which in some ways is more damaging:

- Isolation
- Sustaining relationships
- Mental illnesses such as depression
How businesses are affected

Potential negative impact on physical health
- poor concentration
- reduced alertness at work
- musculoskeletal pain
- increased risk of accident and injury
- increased risk of absence

Potential negative impact on mental health
- difficulty to find work
- stigmatisation and discrimination
- impact on self esteem and lower happiness

= Loss of productivity
Obesity and the law at work:

**Equality Act 2010**
“If a workplace feature or practice puts an employee with a disability at a disadvantage, an employer should look to see what 'reasonable adjustments' it can make and meet with them to discuss what can be done to help them. For example, this could be as simple as supplying a special chair or power-assisted piece of equipment”

**Health and Safety Act 1974**
Duty of care to minimise risk
Court rulings on obesity

There have been several court cases in the UK and Europe, and it is now accepted that obesity itself is not a disability. However, where obesity causes an impairment which is substantially adverse and long-term, that impairment might be regarded as a disability by an employment tribunal.

This could be costly to business.........
The changing nature of work:

• More automated therefore sedentary
• Technology
• Manufacturing to services industries
• Long hours
• Long commute
Translating policy into practice in the workplace
Some things that we are doing nationally

- National Obesity Forum
- Public Health England- One you
- Change4life Employers Guide
  How to use Change4life to create a healthier workforce
- Investing in a Workplace Fit for the Future, The Work Foundation
‘An independent review into the impact on: Employment outcomes of drug or alcohol addiction, and obesity’

Dame Carol Black 2016

Evidence of successful interventions addressing nutrition and obesity at work

• Behavioural change interventions – IDG research
• Environmentally based - StepJockey
• Workplace programmes for healthy nutrition and physical activity
The Workplace

- Ensure workers move at least once an hour i.e have the printer on the other side of the office.
- Standing desks can provide exercise whilst at work.
- Walking meetings
- Onsite gyms can also be set up at the office if the company is big enough or a gym membership can be provided as a bonus
Healthy cafeterias

- High quality food should be available to employees
- Calorie labeling or portion control in staff restaurants
- Healthy food should be easily available to encourage consumption
- Companies that are not big enough for cafeterias can provide vouchers to staff for local healthy restaurants.
- Fruit can also be provided to staff instead of a vending machine.
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