

What is a Wellness Program?

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A wellness program is a comprehensive health initiative designed to maintain or improve well-being through proper diet, exercise, stress management, and illness prevention. Wellness programs can include smoking cessation, weight loss education, fitness challenges, therapy, and many other plans designed to increase the overall health of an individual. In the past, wellness programs were offered by primary care physicians and insurance companies. However, there has been a growing trend for companies to develop workplace wellness programs for their employees.

Workplace wellness programs not only fight the upward trend of unhealthy employees, but also decrease medical care costs and insurance premiums. Employers can provide information in a variety of formats, such as wellness videos, pamphlets, health-related quizzes, and bulletin boards. According to The American Institute for Preventative Medicine, 91% of today's organizations have a health and wellness program, compared to 78% a decade ago. Workplace wellness program may also include incentives to encourage employee participation.

Wellness programs are different from health promotion

What makes a wellness program different from health promotion? The definition of health is for the physical body to be disease free. There is usually an end goal to be healthy, i.e. losing weight or exercising to reduce the risk of long-term illnesses. Wellness is considered a lifestyle journey to balance of every facet of life: physical, spiritual, emotional, intellectual, environmental, and occupational well-being.

Benefits of a wellness program

A workplace wellness program provides resources and introduces interactive ways for employees to improve their health and well-being. Healthy employees have low rates of absenteeism and higher rates of productivity, and are less likely to be injured on the job. As a result, employers experience a decrease in direct costs such as health care and workers' compensation insurance. Workplace wellness programs can also improve employee morale and loyalty to the company.

How to implement a workplace wellness program

Developing a workplace wellness program isn't a complicated process.

- Establish the goal of the wellness program

- Decide the company's level of involvement in the program

- Determine the budget and expected return on investment (ROI)

Choose employee rewards
Write and communicate the policy/program
Periodically evaluate the program for improvements

What is the law?

Four federal laws focus on workplace wellness and prohibiting discrimination based on health status.*

Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA) prohibits discrimination by group health plans based on an individual's health status, with certain exceptions for wellness programs to offer discounts based on the individual's health status.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits employment discrimination based on health status, but makes certain exceptions for those who volunteered for wellness programs.

The Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act (GINA) prohibits employment discrimination and forbids employers from inquiring about an individual's genetic information, i.e. health status or family history.

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) established standards to protect the privacy of personal health information, including information collected by individual workplace wellness programs.