

WORK WITH HEART

World Heart Federation

Over 17.2 million people die each year from heart disease and stroke, making them the leading cause of death worldwide. Yet 80% of premature deaths could be avoided by controlling the main risk factors: tobacco use, unhealthy diet and physical inactivity.

Millions of productive life-years are lost annually, posing significant threats to the vitality of our highly-interdependent global system, especially in the context of the current financial crisis.

Businesses around the world, as well as leading organizations such as the World Health Organization and the World Economic Forum have recognized the importance of employee's health to achieve core business objectives. Many have committed to include health promotion on their corporate agenda.

There is an urgent need to extend these benefits to all employees and workers, in all sectors and parts of the world. In particular, those in low- and middle-income countries, where over 80% of deaths from cardiovascular disease currently occur, would benefit greatly from the implementation of such programmes.

Workplace health promotion programmes have been shown to yield an excellent return on investment. For example, in 2005, a comprehensive study confirmed earlier findings that workplace programmes can achieve a 25-30% reduction in medical and absenteeism costs in an average period of about 3.6 years. There are also clear health benefits, both short and long term, for individuals, their families and communities.

About workplace wellness programmes

A workplace wellness programme does not need not be complex or expensive.

Simple changes that have been taken up by workplaces include:

1. Offering information to workers, such as leaflets telling people about the risk factors for heart disease and stroke
2. Establishment of health policies, e.g. no tobacco use in the building
3. Encouraging good eating habits, e.g. offering information about the calorie and fat content of canteen food, adding more whole grain meals, natural products, fruits and vegetables on the menu
4. Encouraging workers to exercise during their breaks. A moderate amount of exercise – at least 30 minutes a day – can reduce the risk of heart disease
5. Offering easy access to drinking water for employees, partners and suppliers in office buildings, outdoor worksites and in meeting rooms
6. Providing heart health checks to workers, where their blood pressure, cholesterol and glucose levels are measured, together with their waist-to-hip ratio and body mass index (BMI) to identify individual risk and advise on appropriate action, where necessary

About heart disease and stroke

- Heart disease and stroke are the leading cause of death worldwide, claiming 17.2 million lives a year, or the equivalent of more than one death every two seconds.
- Contrary to popular belief, heart disease is not just a “rich country” problem: around 80% of deaths from heart disease occur in low- and middle-income countries.
- The main modifiable risk factors for heart disease are:
 - Tobacco use
 - Poor diet
 - Lack of physical activity
- Other contributors include:
 - Overweight and obesity
 - Stress
- Taken together, the three modifiable risk factors account for around 80% of deaths from heart disease and stroke, which are largely preventable if these risk factors are reduced.
 - Regular exercise – Physical inactivity increases the risk of developing heart disease by 1.5 times, partly because it raises the likelihood of developing significant cardiovascular disease risk factors.
 - Increased consumption of fruit and vegetables from less than three to more than five servings a day has been shown to produce a 17% reduction in coronary heart disease risk.
 - High blood pressure is closely related to excessive consumption of salt. Avoid foods high in salt, refrain from adding salt and be aware of the salt content of food in restaurants and processed foods. A universal reduction of 3g of salt a day would lead to a 22% drop in the number of deaths resulting from strokes and a 16% fall in the number of deaths from coronary heart disease.
 - Quit smoking – Within two years of quitting, the risk of coronary heart disease is substantially reduced, and over time the risk returns to that of a non-smoker.
 - “Know your numbers” – The only way for an individual to know his or her level of risk for heart disease and stroke is to be assessed by a healthcare professional. This includes measuring blood pressure, cholesterol and glucose levels, together with waist-to-hip ratio and Body Mass Index. Once overall risk is established, individuals can agree on a plan for specific actions that should be taken to reduce their risk.

About World Heart Day

- World Heart Day was established in 2001 to increase public awareness of the risk of heart disease and stroke, and to promote preventive measures.
- It has become a truly global event. Last year, activities were organised in over 100 countries.
- World Heart Day 2008 generated over 1 billion media impressions, and over 950 articles and reports on TV and radio, and in magazines and newspapers worldwide.
- On World Heart Day each year World Heart Federation members organize activities such as runs, public talks, concerts and sporting events.

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