



MANAGING OBESITY IN THE WORKPLACE

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Managing Obesity In The Workplace

Employers dealing with obesity in the workplace have to contend with misunderstanding, stigma, lifestyles outside work and several other issues.

Unfortunately, we live in a world where there is one serious health condition that attracts more criticism than sympathy, where a level of stigma is considered acceptable – obesity.

In the workplace we need to be careful. It's clearly not the job of employers to make judgements or pass comment on the size and weight of employees – especially when work plays a major part in influencing eating and exercise habits, stress levels, mental health and our life outside of work.

The relationship between obesity and work is complex. Routines and behaviours at work – particularly given the fact that much of modern work is sedentary – can have a substantial impact on lifestyle and wellbeing more generally.

With these sensitivities in mind, we can consider the potentially negative effects of employees being overweight.

There is evidence to suggest that employees who are overweight and obese take more days of sickness absence in comparison to 'healthy weight' employees. Often, there is an optimism bias when it comes to our health, we are considered healthy up until the point of being unwell with a medical condition.

Some research into levels of work functioning has suggested that the ability to meet pressures and demands of work may be reduced in those who are overweight and obese, although this was more prevalent in physical demands than mental or social job demands. Research discussing the link between obesity and unemployment has suggested that being obese could be both a cause and consequence of unemployment.

There's also the issue of how obese people are perceived – prejudice, discrimination and bullying – that impacts on their performance and all-round potential as an employee. Weight, fat and appearance are shamed and criticised in every waking moment of our lives. Sadly, the criticism of weight, fat and appearance is a learned behaviour, more importantly, it is a behaviour that can be changed.

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Factors to consider

- **Whose responsibility is it?** – Individual, family, work, public health
- **What to do?** – Educate, health screening, support groups, weight management programmes, apps, coaching
- **How do you manage stigma?** – labelling, discrimination, surveys
- **Which measurement do you use?** – BMI, waist, body fat, visceral fat score, muscle mass
- **Effect of work on obesity?** - shifts, sedentary roles, canteens, stress, mental health, exercise
- **Effect of obesity on work?** - performance, productivity, absence, medical costs, presenteeism

How do workplaces support and empower employees to manage their fat levels?

- Conduct a needs assessment/wellbeing survey.
- Use a holistic approach to weight management issues.
- Reduce the stigma and criticism surrounding obesity.
- Encourage employees to make choices that help to improve mental health and support those who struggle. How you feel has a huge influence – many people reach for unhealthy foods and exercise less when feeling bored, lonely or are experiencing mental ill health.
- Include environment and organisational change as part of the plan (addressing issues of workload, stress, shift-regimes, implementing improved food selection etc.)
- Emphasise employee participation (seek feedback from employees, monitor participation and drop-off rates, establish a committee of participants to help implement interventions etc.)
- Evaluation is essential to examine how well the programme is progressing, using multiple data sources including direct feedback from programme participants).

Pound4lb Challenge

To help empower employees to manage their weight we have designed the Pound4lb weight loss Challenge...

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