

Integrating Oral Health into Your Wellness Program

Understanding Its Important Role in Your Employees' Overall Health

Over the past five years, more employers have come to understand the importance of promoting wellness among their employees.¹ In fact, among American businesses with 50 or more employees, the prevalence of some form of health promotion program reaches 81 percent.²

Whether your company already has a wellness program or is considering introducing one for the first time, oral health should be a key component – because good oral health is about much more than just having healthy teeth and a nice smile.

Oral health plays a vital role in maintaining general health and overall well-being.

A lack of dental care and untreated oral disease can negatively affect an individual's ability to perform basic actions, including speaking, smiling, kissing, chewing, maintaining proper nutrition or attending work. In fact, national statistics show that dental-related absences for one year totaled more than 164 million work hours for adults.³

In addition, emerging science points to important associations between periodontal (gum) disease and several debilitating and expensive-to-treat medical conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and the risk of premature birth.⁴

The link between oral health and overall health is the fundamental message of the U.S. Surgeon General's Report on Oral Health in America. Fact is: the mouth is a key part of the human body and the importance of encouraging good oral health should not be overlooked.

Efforts to encourage preventive oral health behaviors should be essential components of any wellness program.

The most common oral diseases – tooth decay and gum disease – can be prevented or eliminated almost

completely if individuals have some basic knowledge and take simple personal steps toward better oral health. While wellness programs vary in the tools and activities offered to employees, oral health components can easily be integrated into many of the categories common to employer wellness initiatives.

- **Risk Identification:** Many wellness programs begin with some sort of risk assessment – whether using self-administered surveys, biometric screenings or a combination of the two. A handful of suitable oral-health-related questions can easily be incorporated into this assessment process or provided as a separate short online survey. This provides each employee with a basis for meaningful discussion during their next dental visit.
- **Educational Programs:** Online oral health resources are a great way to encourage employees to explore the topic of oral health at their own pace. Access to practical oral health information can often be provided by your dental benefits carrier – and can easily be integrated into employee newsletters and other internal communication vehicles.
- **Workplace Changes:** While a candy bowl at the front desk or a vending machine filled with sweets may not pose the same level of threat as other workplace hazards, they do not advance oral health. Offering sugar-free gum and snacks in the employee break room – or fluoride mouthrinse dispensers, one-use toothbrushes and fluoride toothpaste in the company lavatories – are just a couple of creative options for establishing a more oral-health-friendly work environment.
- **Behavior Modification:** The ultimate goal of any wellness program is to guide employees' choices toward the adoption of healthier behaviors. Along with actively promoting basic oral hygiene activities (such as brushing at least twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste, flossing and using fluoride mouthrinse), an oral health wellness program should highlight the value of regular visits to the dentist. This includes early detection of

tooth decay and gum disease when it can be easily reversed, in addition to spotting early signs of many serious illnesses such as diabetes, blood disorders, oral cancers and immune system problems.⁵

Dental benefits bring additional value to your wellness program.

A direct way to improve the oral health of your employees is to offer them dental benefits. Most people are aware of the importance of visiting the dentist. It's a simple fact that people with dental coverage are more likely to make that appointment – while only 34 percent of uninsured individuals report seeing a dentist twice a year or more.⁶

And, it's no secret that most wellness programs serve not only the general purpose of improving the health of employees, but also the practical business strategy of helping to contain health care costs.

Dental coverage has long been at the forefront of prevention-focused care – a perspective shared by most wellness programs. The dental benefits model encourages frequent check-ups and preventive services to avoid more costly treatments down the road. This makes dental benefits affordable and lowers claims costs. And, as noted above, having coverage is the major factor that determines whether individuals make the appointment and seek basic preventive services.

Choosing the best plan for your employees starts with understanding their specific oral health needs.

Different groups of people face different oral health challenges. Generational attitudes and family status can drastically affect the type of dental care your employees are likely to need.

When selecting a dental plan and communicating oral health information, consider the distinct needs of these demographic groups.

- **Younger Employees**, those in their 20s and 30s, generally face fewer oral health challenges. They benefit the most from prevention – and expect easy online access to benefits information.
- **Established Employees**, generally ages 40 to 59, are more likely to require restorative procedures. They tend to seek

a better understanding of their oral health and appreciate access to expert resources. They are willing to pay for the best possible care and expect choice.

- **Near-retirement Employees**, who may be in their 60s or even 70s, are more likely to face chronic conditions and may not be aware of the ongoing importance of regular examinations. Education is key, as some may inaccurately believe that preventive care is no longer relevant. With people remaining in the workforce longer, this group cannot be overlooked.

By understanding these variances, and then taking a look at the makeup of your group, you can choose dental benefits options that best meet the requirements of your organization's employees.

Good oral health can contribute in numerous ways to overall well-being. Integrating prevention-focused oral health initiatives into your wellness programs demonstrates your company's commitment to the total health and well-being of your employees.

For more information on oral health, dental benefits and how both fit in with your wellness program, please talk to your broker, contact a Delta Dental representative or visit any of the resources listed below:

Oral Health & Wellness Information:
www.oralhealthia.com

Risk Assessment Tool:
www.trusttheleader.com/riskassessment

1 National Institute for Health Care Reform, "Growing Employer Demand for Wellness Programs," Research Brief, July 2010.
2 Wellness Councils of America, "Building A Well Workplace," <http://www.welcoa.org/wellworkplace/index.php?cat=1&page=1>, accessed March 24, 2011.
3 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Call to Action to Promote Oral Health, NIH Publication No. 03-5303, Spring 2003.
4 University of Maryland Medical Center, Periodontal disease - Risk Factors, January 2008.
5 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General. Rockville, MA: US Department of Health and Human Services, National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research, National Institutes of Health, 2000.
6 The Long Group Retail Dental Insurance Consumer Acceptance Survey, June 2009. (Findings are based on a sampling of consumers ages 25-65 within the top 25 dental markets.)