

VITA

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Exercise as Medicine

The results of America's love affair with fast food and evenings spent glued to the television are beginning to show up on its waistline. An alarming 72 million Americans are obese according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In addition to the long list of chronic diseases caused and exacerbated by obesity, being overweight significantly increases the risk of traumatic workplace injuries.¹ The price of employees' sedentary lifestyles combined with stationary job tasks is high and employers are picking up the tab. Instances of obesity and inactivity combined cost companies more than 3.5 weeks of productivity per year, per employee with a price tag of more than \$10 billion in 2005.² Employers are ailing and in search of a cure for this affliction. Can exercise be the right medicine?

Exercise has the potential to prevent chronic health conditions and can protect against back pain, musculoskeletal diseases and obesity.³ Armed with this knowledge, some companies are incorporating onsite group stretch and flex programs into their injury prevention curriculum. Stretch and flex programs, if designed and executed

properly, may help lower healthcare costs and reduce the severity of injuries. *Vita Opus* interviewed Jennifer A. Hess, D.C., M.P.H., Ph.D., an expert in human physiology and ergonomics and currently a research associate with the Labor Education and Research Center at the University of Oregon, to get her perspective on stretch and flex and exercise programs.

Hess believes that stretching is valuable for workers. She noted, however, that "it's only one component of fitness." Hess advocates a 20 to 30 minute program that incorporates aerobics, strength training and endurance conditioning. She admits that this is a lofty aspiration for most employers, but some organizations, such as fire departments, are using this formula with success.⁴ Hess believes the method of longer fitness training will be the standard in the future, but for now the 5 to 15 minute program model is all that most employers are willing to greenlight. "A re-education is needed," she said.

Stretch and flex programs are a big investment. "If you are going to spend the money, you should come up with a program that will work," said Hess. "The cost of the

program and the evaluation link needs to be strong." She advises employers to assess their programs based on a series of trailing indicators such as the rates, severity and costs of injuries, including the cause of injury and level of worker flexibility. To help with the program design process, Hess has outlined the key concepts of an effective stretch and flex program which include: tailoring exercises to job duties, stretching regularly - 2 to 3 days per week minimum, using trained instructors to lead classes, taking stretch breaks at appropriate times, ensuring employees' compliance, evaluating performance and company commitment to the program. She notes that the most successful programs are those that include management as visible participants.

The verdict is still out on whether stretch and flex programs can be the cure-all for reducing workplace injuries and curbing healthcare costs, but some studies show that it can help. At the very least, the program gets employees limber and prepared for the task at hand.

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