

CREATING HEALTHY WORKPLACES

Helping employers build healthy and
supportive work environments



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Introduction



March 4th is World Obesity Day

Obesity is a global problem, and it affects us all. Around 800 million of us are living with the disease, with millions more at risk. We know the roots of obesity run deep, and the only way we can make progress is by working together. We all have a part to play – and as employers, this includes YOU.

Employers today have an unprecedented opportunity to create healthier environments in formal, flexible or hybrid workplaces. It is not only about the physical workspace, but the practical and emotional support needed for employees to feel included, belong and ultimately thrive.

The following resources will help you take the steps you and your workforce need:

- 1** Understand obesity as a disease and a risk factor for other diseases
- 2** Use best-practice to build healthy workplace environments
- 3** Communicate with employees effectively and sensitively on the topic of obesity

We invite you to use World Obesity Day on March 4th as an opportunity to engage with your employees about obesity and health more generally.

We know that an inclusive workplace is the only workplace that truly thrives. These resources will help you start a dialogue with your teams about how you can best support them to live healthier, happier, longer lives.

Why now?



800

MILLION
800 Million people
around the
world are living
with obesity.



400

MILLION
children around the world
are expected to be
living with obesity by 2035.



OBESITY

Obesity is a disease and
a risk factor for other
diseases such as heart
disease, diabetes and
some cancers.



1.9

BILLION
people around the
world living with
obesity by 2035.

Obesity is one of the biggest public health problems facing the world today. It impacts an individual's physical and mental health and puts them at greater risk from other chronic diseases, including heart disease, diabetes and some cancers.

Obesity is increasing across all segments of society. For many, unhealthy workplaces can contribute to the physical, emotional and economic impact of obesity. Adopting a healthy workplace can help reduce the impact on employees and organisations.

Changes in working and living patterns may further impact physical and mental health. Work-from-home environments can make it harder to manage and prevent overweight and obesity.

These changes include:

- Increased stress levels impacting sleep, eating patterns and mental health.
- Changes in mealtime routines.
- Decreased access to healthy food
- Decreased physical activity due to changes in commute or facilities.
- Childcare and additional obligations that limit opportunities for healthy choices.
- Increased screen time and exposure to unhealthy food advertising.



**World
Obesity
Day** March 4

Obesity: Know the facts

Obesity is widely misunderstood. For employers to support staff effectively, they must understand what obesity is, what factors drive it and how to talk about it. You may also want to include an understanding of obesity module in any health and HR training that you run for staff or management.

Obesity is a disease

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines obesity as “abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that presents a risk to health”. It is a chronic disease driven by complex factors, many of which are outside of an individual’s control.

The roots of obesity run deep. Diet and exercise are contributors, but a variety of biological and genetic factors can predispose people to a higher risk of obesity. Our physical and social environment can also expose us to unhealthy foods designed to make us eat more.

Employers need to recognise obesity as a disease and take this into consideration when developing HR policies and health initiatives.

Obesity is not a matter of lifestyle

There are many stigmatising assumptions made about people living with obesity. It is often presented as a lifestyle choice or a lack of willpower. The mantra to ‘eat less, move more’ fails to acknowledge that obesity is a disease and that there are many other factors that may impact health.

Individuals should not be blamed for their disease.

Be aware of weight bias and stigma

Weight bias describes negative attitudes and assumptions based on an individual’s weight. This can often lead to weight stigma when people act on that bias. In many countries, people living with obesity and overweight suffer from stigma, weight bias and discrimination. This can affect mental and physical wellbeing and may prevent people from seeking necessary medical care.

In a work setting, it’s important to be aware of potential areas of weight bias, including hiring processes, promotions, disciplinary actions and contract termination rates. In some instances, people with obesity are often paid less than healthy-weight counterparts for the same work. This is more pronounced for women, who may receive up to 6% less for the same work, whilst men with obesity may tend to sort themselves into lower-paying jobs. Employers can address stigma at work by maintaining rigorous HR processes and creating a culture of support, education and inclusivity.

The social and cultural context of a country will impact the perception of overweight and obesity. While people’s external reactions towards people living with obesity may differ, the health issues and risks associated with obesity are consistent. It is therefore important to ensure that messaging about obesity is tailored to the local and national context.



Obesity in the workplace

A driving factor of obesity is the ‘**obesogenic environment**’: the influence that surroundings, opportunities or conditions of life have on promoting obesity. Many people spend over half their waking day at work, so work environments play a key role in overall health. This environment includes the physical work space, company culture and policies.

Investing in appropriate resources and support can positively impact productivity, employee engagement, healthcare costs, staff retention, talent retention and company reputation. Unhealthy and stressful workplaces are associated with greater dissatisfaction and harassment for those who are living with overweight or obesity. Companies that promote health in the workplace can significantly reduce absenteeism and presenteeism, and improve overall work relations and productivity.



Legal Requirements

As employers, you are likely to have legal obligations to monitor and support the mental and physical wellbeing of your employees, both ‘on-site’ and when working from home.

Obesity is a disease. Be sure to consider relevant policies, recommendations and laws when supporting employees living with obesity.

Communication

Obesity can be a difficult issue to discuss, but it is important to show employees that it is a topic that can be discussed in a safe, non-judgemental environment.

Language

Consider the language you use when discussing obesity. Use ‘people-first’ language that puts the individual before the disease, eg use the phrase “people living with obesity” instead of “obese people”. A person is not defined by their condition and your language should reflect that. Learn more about people-first language [here](#).

Discussions around obesity should focus on health, not weight loss. Emphasis should be on the health benefits of living an active and balanced lifestyle. Avoid negative assumptions regarding an individual’s current eating or exercise patterns. It is important to recognise that people living with obesity may have specific requirements. Take this into consideration when discussing obesity and make sure not to place the responsibility for addressing obesity on individuals.

Imagery

Be aware of potentially stigmatising imagery. Images used to illustrate the subject of obesity often depict people with obesity from unflattering angles, inactive or consuming unhealthy food. They often focus on abdomens or lower bodies, and exclude heads from the frame. If you are addressing issues of obesity in your employee communications, be sure to use images from [non-stigmatising image banks](#) and carefully consider how you represent people living with obesity.

Recommendations: FOSTERING A HEALTHY WORKPLACE

Below is some core guidance for a healthy workplace. Remember the goal is to achieve improvements in long-term health.

1

Create a culture of health

People must feel supported in their health journey. Recognise the impact of stress on obesity and adopt written and unwritten policies that explicitly encourage employees to prioritise health throughout the working day.

2

Implement policies that tackle stigma

Review HR policies to check for biases at all stages. Pay special attention to your biases during interviews, promotion considerations, penalisations, wage offers, position assignments, and in your general language use.

3

Pair prevention with treatment

The workplace should be an environment that encourages healthy habits including healthy eating and living an active lifestyle. However, it is important to ensure treatment options and policies are in place to support employees living with obesity. The roots of obesity are complex and varied, and comprehensive obesity care should cover behavioural counselling, anti-obesity medications or bariatric surgery, depending on needs.

4

Listen to your employees

No single approach will work for all employees. It depends on organisational size and structure, employee demographics, business operations and company resources. Studies have shown that 'generic' employee wellness programmes rarely work. The first step towards building a tailored approach towards employee health is to begin by surveying your workforce and finding out what support they really need.



5

Be wary of 'fad' initiatives

'Tick box' health initiatives often place responsibility on employees to 'fix' themselves, when the reality is obesity requires integrated, long-term approaches. Nutritional and exercise goals can contribute to an overall healthy lifestyle, but be sure to acknowledge the wider roots of obesity when implementing health initiatives. Remember that some employees living with obesity may not be able to take part in certain activities and programmes. Effective employee health policies are about creating a lasting culture of support and inclusivity.

6

Strong and visible leadership

Support is needed at all levels of the organisation. Programmes are more successful when there is participation and buy-in from management and leadership.

7

Communicate effectively and through multiple channels

Be clear about your company mission and the practical support on offer. Communicate with employees through a variety of means (emails, posters, announcements at meetings etc)

8

Monitor progress

Continue to recognise where your organisation is succeeding and where improvement is needed. Any improvement is good so be realistic with your expectations and your tracking. Identify which areas need modification.



Recommendations: PRACTICAL STEPS

It can be difficult to translate employee needs into effective health strategies. Rather than rely only on short-term incentives such as step counts and weight-loss goals, create a physical and cultural environment that promotes good mental and physical health.

General:

- If offered, insurance policies should support employees living with or at risk of obesity.
- Offer discounted access to inclusive health clubs and facilities, but be sure not to present this in a way that may alienate employees who do not or cannot use them.
- Offer training on topics such as nutrition, stress management, mental health and general wellbeing.
- Offer appropriate behavioral counselling and treatment options for employees living with obesity.
- Where possible actively encourage employees to work flexibly. Explicitly encourage regular breaks from the computer.

On site:

- Provide minimally processed and natural food options in cafeterias.
- Avoid vending machines that stock ultra-processed foods due to storage requirements.
- Provide healthier food at meetings and events - make healthy options the default.
- While physical activity is not a 'quick fix' for obesity, living an active lifestyle confers a number of additional health benefits and must be taken into consideration in the workplace.
- Encourage healthy commutes by providing showering and changing facilities, bike storage or 'cycle to work' schemes.
- Make sure that work stations are comfortable and well set-up.
- Walking areas and stairs should be safe, accessible, well-lit and attractive.

Working from home:

- Lead a positive work from home campaign.
- Acknowledge the additional challenges that may come from new working environments, both in terms of social, physical and mental health.
- Provide a safe and accessible forum for employees to communicate their needs and concerns about changes in their work or workplace.
- Ensure employees feel connected and supported in remote working environments. Encourage informal team check-ins and confidential mental health checks.
- Where possible actively encourage employees to work flexibly and take regular screen breaks.
- Run virtual ergonomic checks on employee workstations to help them use their at-home work set up safely. Where possible provide suitable ergonomic equipment.



Next steps

Get inspired! See what other employers are doing:



Get involved! Learn more about obesity and support the campaign at:



Start the conversation!

Get involved with the World Obesity Day campaign today!

WWW.WORLDOBESITYDAY.ORG

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. Roots of obesity explainer
2. Obesity factsheet



The roots of obesity run deep

Together we can create a healthier future.

To have a real impact on obesity, we need to work together to address its many root causes throughout society. Simplifying the disease to any one cause can make treating it even harder. So we must raise awareness and improve access to the appropriate information.

Let's work together to combat the root causes of obesity.



1 BIOLOGY

The human body has in-built mechanisms to protect itself from starvation - this can make it hard to maintain weight loss.

2 FOOD

Ultra-processed food, now seen across the globe, is contributing to the rapid rise in obesity.

3 GENETIC RISK

Our genes account for somewhere between 40-70% of likelihood of developing obesity.

4 HEALTHCARE ACCESS

Without access to trained healthcare professionals, most people who suffer from obesity won't reach and maintain a healthy long-term weight goal.

5 LIFE EVENTS

Prenatal life, early adulthood, pregnancy, illnesses and medications can all influence weight gain.

6 MARKETING

There is a complex relationship between food systems and health, with marketing of foodstuffs having a known link to obesity.

7 MENTAL HEALTH

Symptoms of some mental health disorders, and their associated medications, can lead to weight gain.

8 SLEEP

Lack of sleep disturbs hormones which can affect your weight - as can high levels of stress.

9 STIGMA

Weight discrimination and stigma can have significant consequences for somebody with obesity.



OBESITY FACT SHEET

1

WHAT IS OBESITY?

Obesity is defined by the World Health Organisation as 'abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that presents a risk to health'. It is most commonly measured by BMI, though there are other methods such as waist and height ratios that taken with BMI, can be more accurate.

2

OBESITY IS A DISEASE

It is caused by a variety of factors, including biology, mental health, genetic risk, environment, healthcare access, and access to ultra-processed food. It is not due to lack of willpower. Learn more about the ROOTS of obesity on the website.

3

OBESITY IS A RISK FACTOR

People living with obesity are at a greater risk from other chronic diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and certain cancers. Obesity is also a risk factor for complications of Covid-19.

4

'EAT LESS, MOVE MORE' DOES NOT "FIX" OBESITY

'Eating less, moving more' implies that weight loss is just about diet and exercise, ignoring other drivers of obesity. Although physical exercise plays an important role in overall health and can be used in the context of comprehensive weight management interventions and prevention strategies, exercise alone is not an effective obesity treatment.

5

WEIGHT STIGMA IS DANGEROUS

In many countries, people living with obesity are regularly blamed for their disease. Weight stigma reinforces assumptions that obesity is merely a person's individual responsibility. It can damage mental and physical wellbeing and may prevent people from seeking necessary medical care. While stigma differs in different parts of the world, one thing is clear: experiencing systemic bias does not help people to adopt healthier lifestyles. In fact, it can make it harder. Learn more about the impact of stigma.

6

INDIVIDUALS ARE NOT TO BLAME FOR THEIR OBESITY

Obesity is often driven by forces outside of a person's control. Biological and genetic factors put some of us at greater risk. Our physical and social environments impact on our ability to live healthy lives and expose us to unhealthy foods that are engineered to make us eat more. Obesity is therefore the result of complex biological, genetic and environmental factors.

7

OBESITY IS NOT JUST ABOUT WEIGHT

Weight is one indicator of obesity, but treating obesity is about improving overall health, not just about losing weight. It is possible for a person with a higher BMI to be managing their disease and living at a 'healthy weight'.

8

OBESITY IS NO LONGER JUST A DISEASE OF RICH COUNTRIES

Obesity is now rising the fastest in lower- and middle-income countries. Many are simultaneously tackling overweight/obesity and under-nutrition. Obesity is especially prevalent in poorer and more vulnerable communities.

9

CHILDHOOD OBESITY CAN AND MUST BE PREVENTED AND TREATED

Childhood obesity has nearly doubled every 10 years. It can profoundly affect children's physical health, social, and emotional well-being, and self-esteem. It is associated with poor academic performance and a lower quality of life. It is often carried through to adulthood, so prevention and treatment is vital to stopping a global rise in obesity. Education is needed to support appropriate nutrition for children.



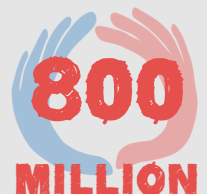
People living with obesity are twice as likely to be hospitalised if tested positive for Covid-19



Childhood obesity is expected to increase by 60% over the next decade, reaching 250 million by 2030.



The medical consequences of obesity will cost over \$1 trillion by 2025.



800 Million people around the world are living with obesity