

Management Advice

Improving Workplace Health – tackling obesity...

In the UK approximately 50% of our adult population are considered to be overweight, over 20% are considered to be obese. Obesity is defined by the body mass index (BMI), a normal BMI is considered to range between 18 and 25. You are considered to be obese when your BMI is over 30 and seriously obese when the BMI is above 40. Tackling weight is a significant preventative medical issue in the United Kingdom. It is concerning that such a large proportion of our population is overweight and even more concerning that the number of people who are gaining weight is increasing.

Weight issues are considered a medical problem and they have a significant impact on mortality. So medical professions knowledge with regards to weight issues and how these can be treated is extremely limited, it is not an area that has benefited from a significant amount of expensive research. What we do know is that some people had a tendency through their genetic makeup to have weight problems.

Being overweight increases the risk of other medical problems such as diabetes, heart problems, cancer problems, kidney problems, infertility, gallstones, varicose veins and low back pain. Many overweight individuals have a combination of health issues.

With regards to the workplace, overweight issues impact on performance and increased rate of ill health retirement and an employee's ability to undertake certain specific tasks such as working in hot environments, confined spaces and due to heart problems, driving and working in the transport industry.

It must not be assumed that every employee with a high BMI is unfit or cannot undertake significantly active roles requiring for example, repetitive manual handling.

Many large individuals attend the gym and maintain a significant level of mobility and physical fitness. Each employee's case has to be taken separately and it is dangerous to make assumptions in this area.

Weight and obesity influences the fit and the use of personal protective equipment. The success of PPE is dependent on a good fit; PPE must be available in the correct size and fit for the purpose.

Ergonomics is another area, which can be significantly affected by an employee's size; this may determine the appropriateness of a workstation, a chair, a desk or their ability to manage a machine or other essential pieces of equipment. Obesity can determine an employee's mobility and dexterity.

Finally a significant area of concern where a small amount of research has been undertaken is the impact of size and weight on accidents susceptibility. Lethargy and the tendency to dose off, a condition known as sleep apnoea, is more common in obese individuals, this may be a significant issue in drivers, particularly of heavy goods vehicles or public service vehicles.

Some research indicates that obese individuals are discriminated against in terms of promotion, training, advancement and pay. Harassment and bullying is commonly reported in overweight individuals. The relevance of the Disability Discrimination Act is currently under discussion with regards to this area. Many authorities would like to see obesity confirmed as a medical condition. There is no doubt that for some individuals being overweight will significantly affect their ability to undertake normal day-to-day activities.

Many organisations now are considering the effectiveness of preventative health issues, health education and encourage employees to examine their own personal health and fitness. Obesity, diet, weight and BMI levels can be included in such an initiative.

The gains from these programmes can impact on a wide variety of areas within the workplace such as accidents, PPE, sickness absence and performance.

If you would like further information on health education or fitness programmes within the workplace, contact us at <mailto:talktous@phcohealth.co.uk> or contact Jane Puncher on 01622 775285.

