

Obesity affects the bottom line

By Dr. Margaret Gaglione FACP

Take a look at your practice group picture from five years ago and today. If they're like most in the Tidewater region, your practice is reflecting the national obesity statistics -- and it's hurting your bottom line and your reputation as a health promoting organization.

The number of overweight and obese people in the United States is staggering. Statistics indicate that two-thirds of Americans are overweight or obese, with one-third being obese. The rate of change for these statistics is even more alarming. Ten years ago only one in five were obese.

Obesity is now a practice management problem. Multiple studies have shown that obese employees have higher rates of absenteeism and more short-term disability claims than normal weight employees. Obese employees also are more likely to lose days from work for their own doctor appointments and they tire more easily.

I guarantee you, none of your employees want to be obese or overweight. Most have tried hard to lose weight, but it is easier said than done. They need help. Leaders who empathize and address this issue sooner than later, will enjoy bigger profits and healthier employees.

To their credit, many large hospitals are beginning to realize the extent of the obesity problem and its direct impact on profits and reputation. They are now adding employee wellness centers to their facilities to increase the access and availability of physical activity.

Unfortunately, while physical activity is critical and necessary, it alone is an inadequate way to solve the obesity crisis. For example, a typical fast food meal is 1300-1500 calories. To burn the equivalent amount in exercise, a 150-pound man would need to walk 14 miles.

What is needed is a paradigm shift. The emphasis has to be on what individuals eat in addition to the amount of exercise they do. Most individuals, even those employed in health care settings, have an appalling lack of knowledge regarding nutrition and the pivotal role it plays in preventing many illnesses.

Wellness programs need to be as dedicated to nutrition education as they are to physical education. Obese individuals need extensive support, education and behavioral supervision throughout the weight loss, transition and maintenance phases of the weight loss program.

Employers that have an interest in improving the health of their employees and the financial picture of their practices must consider referring to programs that will provide the support and education necessary to really put a dent in this growing epidemic.

Dr. Gaglione is the medical director of Tidewater Bariatrics in Chesapeake. She is a board certified internal medicine physician and bariatric specialist who frequently speaks to businesses and medical practices on obesity's impact on business and society. She can be reached at 644-6819 or www.tidewaterbariatrics.com.