



About 55 employees at Children's Hospital Central California participate in a Pilates class Wednesday evening. These days, more Weight Watchers meetings are being held in workplaces, employees are heading to Pilates classes and companies are screening employees' health -- all in an effort to create a healthier, less costly workplace.

Darrell Wong / The Fresno Bee

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Employers want to shed pounds

Businesses take approaches to prevent billions of dollars lost from obese workers.

By Robert Rodriguez / The Fresno Bee

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Angela Victoria doesn't miss the pain in her shins, the high blood pressure or the fear of developing diabetes.

She's lost 72 pounds over the past year with the help of a weight-loss program at work, and she said she feels like a new person.

"I have already gotten rid of all my big clothes," said Victoria, 36, a clerk at Fresno Regional Medical Center's outpatient dialysis department. "I don't want to go back to being that way."

Victoria's success is what many employers are hoping for as they struggle to deal with workers who are becoming heavier and unhealthier, costing businesses billions of dollars.

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Obese employees are estimated to cost U.S. companies \$13 billion a year, according to a 2003 report by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. And their presence is growing. They made up 37% of the work force in 2005, up from 29% in 2000.

For years, hard-pressed employers have trimmed benefits, increased premiums or switched to lower-cost health plans to shrink ballooning health-care costs, triggered partially by obese workers.

But that attitude is beginning to change.

These days, Weight Watchers meetings are being held in a growing number of workplaces, employees are heading to Pilates classes after work and companies are screening their employees' health — all in an effort to create a healthier, less costly workplace.

"You can cut benefits and cut deals to try and control your costs, but unless you control your [medical costs], you are not going to change this downward spiral we are in," said Joyce Blatherwick, risk and benefits administrator for Missoula County, Mont. "The fact is if you don't have cases of diabetes, joint replacements or heart attacks, it is going to save the plan money."

Missoula County gained national attention recently when it offered employees \$10 a pound to lose weight.

Blatherwick admitted she wasn't sure how the county's 810 employees would respond. But she said she knew they had to do something — the county's health-care costs rose by double digits last year, forcing it to add a \$500 deductible to its health-care plan for the first time.

Blatherwick's incentive program worked. The Weight Watchers meeting quickly filled up with 50 people. Demand was so great that about 30 people were put on a waiting list.

As part of the county's incentive program, the employees get their cash after reaching their goal weight, and they must keep it off for six weeks.

Blatherwick estimated the program may cost about \$40,000, but she said she thinks it's well spent.

"No one is arguing why we are spending the money," she said. "Because if it works, it will save everyone money in lower health-care costs."

While Missoula County's methods may appear extreme, several Fresno employers, including Community Medical Centers, Children's Hospital Central California and Fresno County, are all tackling the issue of obesity and improving employee health.

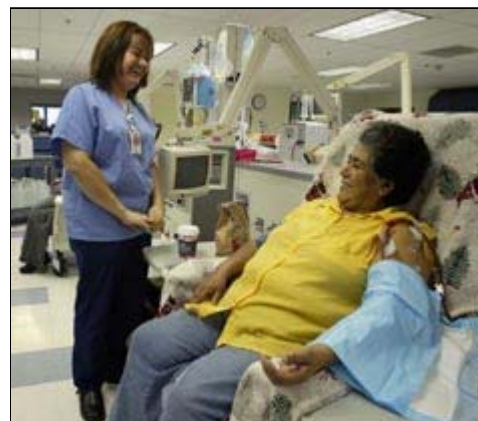
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Angela Victoria, left, checks in with patient Juana Luna at Fresno Regional Medical Center's dialysis department. Victoria has lost 72 pounds since April.

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Among the most visible signs are on-site meetings held by Weight Watchers, a national weight loss program.

The group's leaders are currently holding 27 workplace meetings in the greater Fresno area.

"We could do more, but we just don't have enough leaders. There are a lot of people who are interested in having a meeting at work," said Teri Knowles, a Weight Watchers leader in Fresno.

Chris Corcoran, Weight Watchers director of customer marketing in New York, said many companies are just now realizing obesity is a major issue that must be confronted.

"This is not a cosmetic problem, or a nice wellness benefit," she said. "This is a serious dollars and cents issue. Corporations are spending a ton of money on health insurance. The only thing they are spending more money on is salaries."

At Community Medical Centers in Fresno, hospital officials watched their health-care costs rise 15% last year. Like many employers, it struggled to keep a lid on costs.

But they are trying a new approach.

"For many years, we have looked at the managed care system as a managed cost system, and we have done almost all we can," said Richard Lord, Community's benefits director. "Now, we are looking at improving the overall health of our employees as a way to reduce costs."

To that end, Community began providing health screenings and holding Weight Watchers meetings. At least 250 employees are participating at Community's various locations.

As an incentive, Community pays employees \$2 for every pound lost and contributes \$2 toward their weekly meeting fee of \$11.95. The employee who loses the most weight after a 12-week session receives a \$250 Fashion Fair gift card.

To encourage Community's 6,500 employees to participate in health screenings, a plasma television was given away. About 10% of employees completed the entire screening process.

Andrea Duerksen, project manager for the Heart Institute at Community, is pleased with the participation and the results. In 36 weeks, Community employees have lost a combined 5,000 pounds.

"This is all coming together," Duerksen said.

During a recent Weight Watchers meeting, several employees said that while the incentives help, they were motivated by something bigger: the desire to become healthier.

Renee Amavizca, 35, who handles billing in Community's catheterization lab, has lost 42 pounds and improved her health. Prior to losing weight, Amavizca was diagnosed with hypoglycemia, a condition she didn't know she had.

"I used to get dizzy and feel real sluggish," Amavizca said. "I knew something was wrong, so I finally went to the doctor."

Changing her diet and losing weight has kept her illness under control.

"I feel totally different," she said. "I have so much energy, at work and at home."

Fresno County government officials are also taking the offensive in trying to contain increases in health-care costs that have ranged in recent years from 5% to 15% a year.

The county's health benefits advisory council is focused on lowering its medical utilization rates along with creating a wellness policy that shifts some of the responsibility of reducing health-care costs to employees.

Paul Nerland, the county's personnel services manager, said a strategy being explored is linking health insurance rates to an employee's health screening. The idea is to create a system that rewards healthy employees with lower costs.

"Keep in mind these are just ideas," Nerland said. "But we have to start looking at our utilization rates."

A preliminary look shows that diabetes and high blood pressure, two medical conditions that can be related to obesity, are among the health issues facing county employees.

Children's Hospital Central California employees can go to an on-site Weight Watchers meeting or a new Pilates class after work.

More than 50 employees signed up for the twice-a-week Pilates class that began this year.

Carla Niemeyer, the hospital's employee service manager, said one of the keys in helping workers lose weight and become healthier is making the services convenient. Weight Watchers meets during employees' lunch hour, and the fitness class starts right after work.

"We believe that if our employees are healthier, it will benefit everyone," Niemeyer said. "But this is not something that happens overnight, these are long-term benefits."

Experts say addressing the problem of obesity in the workplace won't be successful without societal and environmental changes.

Part of that shift is beginning to take place.

A local health-care partnership is spending \$2.6 million over a three-year period to take on obesity in the San Joaquin Valley.

Kathleen Curtis, interim associate dean for the College of Health and Human Services at California State University, Fresno, said the effort will focus on supporting a healthier lifestyle from improving school nutrition to greater access to farm-fresh

fruits and vegetables.

"What we have found is that the individual approach has not been very successful for everyone," Curtis said. "Instead, we are looking at ways to change our culture and environment, and the workplace efforts to promote wellness and fitness are a part of that."

But Curtis said she does not expect change to happen quickly or easily. She said businesses must start taking a harder look at creating healthier workers.

"The idea that you actually pay people for staying healthy is a very different concept than paying the bills when people get sick," Curtis said. "Across the board, the third-party payment system is based on people being broken rather than staying well. It is a paradigm shift that is not readily apparent to everyone, but when people really think about it, this becomes an investment rather than a cost."

Curtis conceded that changing attitudes will take time, even among her own ranks.

Fresno State's College of Health and Human Services began a faculty fitness program in October.

It meets at 7a.m., and employees practice flexibility, strengthening and some aerobics.

It has five regular members.

"Believe me, now that our faculty are coming back, I am going to be pushing it," Curtis said.

The reporter can be reached at brodriguez@fresnobee.com or (559) 441-6327.



The "before" picture of Juana Luna

