
HEALTH PLAN WEEK

New Program Moves Chronic Disease Prevention Upstream in Management Cycle

For employers interested in keeping their employees healthy and productive, Health Care Service Corp., Inc. (HCSC) is launching a novel early disease intervention program that puts chronic disease prevention well upstream in the employee health management cycle.

HCSC, which operates Blues plans in New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas and Illinois, announced the program on Oct. 14 (*HPW 10/13/08, p. 8*) after having successfully piloted it with Brinker International, a Dallas-based company. The program screened Brinker's headquarters employees for Metabolic Syndrome (Met-S), considered to be a precursor to obesity, itself a precursor to diabetes, hypertension, heart disease and certain kinds of cancers. HCSC appears to be the first U.S. health plan to target Met-S.

Paul Handel, M.D., HCSC senior vice president and chief medical officer, tells *HPW* that the company targeted Met-S because of its high correlation to obesity, a condition that now affects one of every four adults. Met-S itself is estimated to affect 50 million people. Handel says that as little as a 5% to 10% reduction in weight for obese or pre-obese individuals will produce several health benefits, including improved insulin sensitivity and lower blood pressure and blood lipids. Weight loss also will drive a reduction in back problems and the need for hip and knee replacements.

Handel says that targeting Met-S at this early stage will help employers target what is becoming a major medical cost item. And implementing these programs now will help employers prepare for what's to come. "We have an obesity epidemic among children as well as adults, and these children most likely will grow up to become obese adults and will enter the work force with high risk factors for chronic diseases."

Recognizing the close link between obesity, chronic diseases and escalating health care costs, especially as its population ages, Japan this past April mandated that all citizens above the age of 40 be tested for Met-S. Handel notes that as part of this government initiative, Japanese employers must reduce the number of their overweight employees by 10% in the next four years, 25% by 2015.

50% See Met-S Reversal

HCSC tested its new 10-week program on 66 employees at Brinker's Dallas headquarters who agreed to

participate in the program. Starting last January, participating employees were screened for blood pressure, waist circumference, triglycerides, blood sugar and HDL (good cholesterol). Anyone with an unhealthy level of any three of the measures is considered to have Met-S and be at greater risk of developing heart disease, diabetes and cancer. The program combined physical fitness activities with nutrition, diet and other health-related education and support resources to achieve behavioral change in those who participated. The overall pilot ended in April.

Tracey Posey, Brinker work life manager, says the company saw a Met-S reversal for more than 50% of employees participating in the pilot, with an average weight loss of 15 pounds.

In its final design, the new wellness program will combine three levels of intervention. Two of the levels — "low touch" and "medium touch" — are already a part of HCSC's established wellness initiatives. The third level — the 10-week "high touch" component — was the focus of the Brinker pilot test. "Adding this third component brings the first two components into a comprehensive wellness strategy because it allows people to access the program at whatever point in their physical health they happen to be," Handel says.

HCSC Explores Web Program

The low-touch component uses HCSC's online Personal Health Management tool. This enables individuals to track their fitness and diet status and interact with nurses, trainers and dietitians. The medium-touch component is the insurer's Lifestyle Management tool. Using this tool, individuals can work with personal coaches by telephone to personalize their health goals and track their progress. The high-touch component is the 10-week program focusing on lifestyle lessons and techniques, including in-person meetings and other educational and support activities.

While the Brinker pilot used a classroom setting, Handel says HCSC is exploring a Web-based program with a DVD for the 10-week session. "This would enable us to combine the physical activities program with an online support component." For Brinker, an online component would enable the company to offer the program to its field employees across the nation.

HCSC also is continuing to evaluate the impact of the program on Brinker participants. Handel says the insurer will roll out the program for employers sometime next year. The program was free for Brinker employees who enrolled in and completed it.

Brinker Reports Unexpected Benefits

Virginia Nisbet, Brinker director of benefits, tells *HPW* that each participant upon enrollment wrote a check for \$100 to cover his or her participation. But Brinker held the checks and returned them uncashed to participants who met all pre- and post-screening requirements and completed the program. Brinker is now three weeks into a second program based on the pilot, in which 49 employees are enrolled.

According to Posey, Brinker participants not only lost weight but also were able to keep it off and achieve further weight reductions, many shedding an additional 15 or so from the weight they lost during the program. She says that while Brinker did not track the program's impact on medication use, eight participants told her that they were able to reduce or stop taking medications

related to their chronic conditions. Participants also reported being more physically active since the weight loss decreased pain associated with pressure on their knees and back.

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HCSC, Inc. is developing a new approach to preventive disease management for employers focusing on Metabolic Syndrome (Met-S). The company, which operates Blue Cross and Blue Shield plans in Illinois, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas, announced on Oct. 14 that the new program, successfully pilot tested at Brinker International, a Dallas-based company, will allow employers to target Met-S in their employees and target them for wellness programs addressing several chronic conditions associated with it. Met-S is considered to be a precursor to obesity and related conditions, including diabetes, hypertension and heart disease. Contact Ross Blackstone at Ross_Blackstone@bcbstx.com.