

How Addressing Hypertension Creates a Healthier, More Productive Workplace

by | **Jerry Penso, M.D.**

Nearly two-thirds of U.S. adults have either hypertension or prehypertension. Health plan sponsors can take steps to help detect and reduce the risk of the disease known as the “silent killer.”





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Ilona Bray. Nolo. 2012.

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It is near the end of your organization's fiscal year—a stressful time for everyone. A key, dedicated employee works late but, instead of going home, he heads to an urgent care center with a severe headache and shortness of breath.

The provider takes his vital signs, including height, weight, temperature and blood pressure. A dangerously high blood pressure reading leads the physician to refer the employee to his primary care provider (PCP) the next day, at which time your employee is diagnosed with hypertension, or high blood pressure. The PCP prescribes antihypertensive medication and recommends lifestyle changes.

After picking up his medication on his way back to the office, the employee realizes that his workplace may have contributed to his new diagnosis. This “aha” moment not only reinforces his resolve to create healthier habits in his own life but to foster healthier habits throughout the organization.

In this scenario, not only was the employee fortunate to have the disease diagnosed before it led to significant complications, but the entire business

benefited from his increased awareness of how workplace environments can increase the risk of hypertension across all genders, ages and races.

The “Silent Killer”

Hypertension is one of the most prevalent health conditions facing Americans. An estimated 68 million Americans—one in every three U.S. adults—have high blood pressure.^{1,2} Almost 30% of American adults have prehypertension, which raises the risk of developing high blood pressure,³ and less than half of those with high blood pressure have their conditions under control.⁴

What makes hypertension so dangerous? At its simplest, blood pressure is the force of blood pushing against the walls of the arteries as the heart pumps blood. If this pressure rises and stays high over time, it can damage the body.

Nearly 20% of Americans are unaware they have the disease,⁵ which is why high blood pressure is often referred to as the “silent killer.” Hypertension often presents no signs or symptoms until a serious medical event

occurs, such as stroke, heart attack or heart failure.

The American Medical Group Foundation's (AMGF) national Measure Up/Pressure Down® hypertension campaign works with medical groups, health systems, partner organizations, employers and individuals across the country to raise awareness of hypertension—its definition, risks, management and prevention. The campaign also enables clinical providers to improve hypertension detection, management and treatment by implementing evidence-based care processes in the clinical setting.

The campaign also provides a number of tools and resources that employers can share with employees to raise their awareness of the disease and encourage early detection and treatment. While there is no one factor that results in a person developing hypertension, the workplace environment often enables behaviors that increase the risk of high blood pressure—physical inactivity, stress and unhealthy diet. Employers that take steps to offer screenings along with encouraging workplace and lifestyle behavior changes benefit from healthier employees who have a positive impression of the employer's interest in their well-being.

Impact of Hypertension on the Workplace

In addition to being one of the most prevalent diseases, hypertension is one of the ten most expensive conditions for U.S. employers.⁶ According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Employees with multiple heart disease and stroke risk factors, such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol, cost employers more in

terms of medical care, absenteeism and lost productivity than employees with one or none of these risk factors.⁷

Another study found the economic burden of illness was higher for hypertension—\$392 per eligible employee—than nine other health conditions.⁸ The same study found individuals with hypertension miss 0.9 to 4.2 additional days of work, compared with those without chronic diseases.^{9,10}

The time away from work is not just when employees are ill. In fact, more than 35 million office visits each year are attributed to hypertension.¹¹ For employers, these office visits can result in scheduled brief periods of time, such as office visits at lunchtime, or unexpected extended periods of time, such as hospitalizations.

The Role of Unhealthy Workplace Habits

Corporate benefits staff, employee plan representatives and human resources leaders—along with employees—all seek a healthy and productive workplace. Consider how the typical workplace environment and culture can contribute to hypertension risk factors:

- **Physical inactivity.** An article published in the *Washington Post* on the health hazards of sitting—whether in the workplace or on the couch—shows the physiological connection of sitting and hypertension. The authors write, “Muscles burn less fat and blood flows more sluggishly during a long sit, allowing fatty acids to more easily clog the heart. Prolonged sitting has been linked to high blood pressure and elevated cholesterol, and people with the most sedentary time are

more than twice as likely to have cardiovascular disease as those with the least.”¹²

- **Unhealthy nutrition choices.** Surveys show that at least two in three American workers are regularly presented with unhealthy food at work through vending machines and celebrations, such as birthdays and holidays.¹³ Another study of nearly 20,000 employees found those who report rarely eating healthy foods, including fruits and vegetables, were 93% more likely to have a higher loss in productivity.¹⁴
- **Alcohol consumption.** A recent trend of workplaces providing access to alcohol during and after business hours is also increasing employees’ risk of hypertension. Several high-profile companies continuously stock alcoholic beverages for the use of employees.¹⁵ Many other organizations offer beer, wine and liquor to employees at holiday parties and other celebratory gatherings.

How Employers Can Encourage Detection and Management

The average American 25 to 54 years old with children spends 8.7 hours—more than a third of his or her day—in the workplace.¹⁶ Given these statistics, the opportunity for employers to promote a healthy office setting is evident. Potential workplace strategies and tactics to reduce hypertension risk factors and encourage hypertension education, detection and management include:

- **Combat unhealthy habits by changing food and drink offerings.** Stock office vending machines and refrigerators with healthy beverages, offer more



takeaways >>

- Hypertension is one of the most prevalent health conditions facing Americans and one of the ten most expensive conditions for employers.
- Nearly 20% of Americans don't realize they have high blood pressure, which often presents no symptoms until a medical event such as a stroke, heart attack or heart failure occurs.
- Physical inactivity, stress and an unhealthy diet, which increase the risk of high blood pressure, often are part of the workplace environment.
- Employers can help by making healthy foods and opportunities to exercise available as well as helping employees manage stress.
- Employers can encourage employees to have an annual health exam and offer free workplace screenings.

nutritious food options for officewide celebrations and always have alcohol-free beverage options.

- **Change the physical office environment.** Build a section of standing and treadmill desks that can be used by employees as often as they'd like. Offer access to the building gym or provide fitness stipends for membership to gyms or fitness studios. And, should location and weather allow, encourage walking meetings.
- **Manage workplace stress at all levels.** Stress affects all employees—from top leadership to entry-level professionals. A 2003 study found that a brief workplace stress management intervention can produce clinically significant reductions in blood pressure and improve emotional health among hypertensive employees.¹⁷
- **Participate in national observances related to hypertension.** Leveraging national publicity surrounding observances related to hypertension and other chronic diseases helps raise awareness among employees. The Measure Up/Pressure Down campaign, for instance, hosts its National Day of Action: Roll Up Your Sleeves! event during National High Blood Pressure Education Month annually in May to encourage organizations to take one "action" for hypertension awareness, detection and control. During the inaugural event in 2014, organizations hosted free blood pressure screenings, healthy potlucks and educational brown bag lunches to engage employees.
- **Encourage employees to have an annual comprehensive**

health exam. Longer than typical appointments for acute conditions, such as an injured ankle or sinus infection, these exams give providers more time to address chronic diseases like hypertension and to counsel patients on risk factors, lifestyle changes and medication adherence.

- **Offer free workplace screenings on a regular basis.** Annual influenza vaccinations are now provided at many companies. Similarly, blood pressure screenings at the workplace increase the likelihood employees will take advantage of the service. If escalated blood pressure readings are recorded (hypertension is defined as greater than 140 mmHg systolic or 90 mmHg diastolic), refer the employee to his or her primary care provider for followup.
- **Consider formalizing the commitment to a healthy workplace.** Joining national programs provides access to resources, tools and knowledge of other organizations. AMGF partner the American Heart Association, with its Fit-Friendly Worksites Program, offers recognition and resources for organizations that prioritize employee health and wellness.

Appropriate education, screening, detection and management for those with undiagnosed and/or uncontrolled hypertension can greatly reduce the risk for stroke, heart attack and heart failure.

Employers should recognize that any employee, regardless of age, race, ethnicity, gender, lifestyle or family history, can develop hypertension. Providing workplace initiatives that reach the entire employee population can be a win-win for employers and employees. 🌐

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