

conversation

with
Desiree Nielsen



If you have an inkling that digestive health is important to employers, plans and individual members, it could be wise to listen to your gut. Though we don't always talk about digestive diseases, they are a valid and growing concern, says registered dietitian Desiree Nielsen. Nielsen will present "Un-Junk Your Diet: How What You Put on Your Plate Determines Your Metabolic Fate" and "Fighting Diabetes With Your Fork" during the preconference enrichment workshops for the 63rd Annual Employee Benefits Conference in Las Vegas, Nevada in November. Editor Robbie Hartman caught up with Nielsen to gather her insights on the digestive health of the population—and what employers and plan sponsors can do about it.

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Can you explain how digestive diseases are impacting the United States population, and are they a growing health problem?

The National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases estimates that 60 million to 70 million people in the United States are affected by digestive diseases. However, it's something we rarely talk about given the nature of symptoms; the affected don't feel like they can speak out about their health. This silence makes it easy to assume it doesn't affect our friends and family members or those in our workplaces.

Concerns such as heart disease, cancer or diabetes tend to receive the most attention in health and wellness, but digestive disease is borne of the same wellness landscape: less healthful lifestyles and increased stress.

What are some of the business impacts of gut health?

Presenteeism is a major challenge for serious digestive disease. Symptoms may impact productivity for those with active irritable bowel syndrome, Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis who may be visiting the bathroom 20 times in a single day.

Benefit plans also will see an impact. Adequate diagnosis and treatment can take years, particularly for those with irritable bowel syndrome and celiac disease. For those with Crohn's disease, the use of costly biological medications is the norm because few other pharmaceuticals are effective in managing the inflammatory damage to the bowel. In addition, long-term disability rates for those with inflammatory bowel diseases (Crohn's and colitis) are similar to those with cancer.

Are there certain industries or workforces that see more issues with gut health?

Digestive disease does not discriminate; however, certain work settings may make daily life with digestive disease more difficult. For example, those who cannot leave their post or who work outdoors without easy access to washroom facilities may have to opt to take a sick day when symptoms are bad. High-intensity or stressful work environments may exacerbate symptoms of chronic disease since stress can increase pain in the bowel.

You've noted that nutrition plays a role in prevention by sometimes helping to ease symptoms and solve the root cause. What are some ways employers can help workers improve their level of nutrition?

Inspiring others to eat well can be a challenge, since the reasons we make the food choices we do are incredibly complex. Creating an environment that makes the healthy choice the easy choice will help to improve things; for example, if food is served in the workplace, offering enticing healthy choices (not just a stale bowl of fruit) will improve intake.

Awareness campaigns and using a social marketing approach matter—But ensuring you hit the right messaging is key. After awareness is increased, employees and members need practical advice to make healthy eating happen. If packed lunches are the norm, advice on how to make a healthy packed lunch (with recipes!) will help. Or if on-site food service or food service in the community is the source of nourishment, advice on making the best selections is important.

And taking advantage of positive peer pressure can provide a boost. I have found that even in the most unlikely environments, holding a health challenge with great incentives can really inspire others to make a change.

What are important first steps for plan sponsors and employers that want to address gut health?

The most important thing an employer can do is reduce the stigma around digestive disease; here, a little irreverence often helps. Look to organizations like Fight Colorectal Cancer for inspirational messages and campaigns such as One Million Strong.

When people feel more comfortable talking about their needs, it will help plan sponsors and employers craft strategies that benefit everyone. In addition, taking a holistic approach to employee wellness that encompasses stress management, access to nutrition care and physical activity will help address root causes of digestive disease.

Are there data comparing the employer cost of investing in better employee nutrition versus the cost of employee medical visits, usage of biologics and other medication, increased productivity and so on?

While I have yet to find data comparing the cost of standard pharmaceutical care versus the addition of nutritional therapy in digestive disease, a look at the basic costs involved is pretty telling. Few dietitians would charge more than \$500 for three months of ongoing nutritional care; however, a single dose of Remicade® for Crohn's can be three times that.

What is a bit challenging is finding specialized nutritional care for digestive disease, because not all dietitians have significant experience in this area. However, as the rates of digestive disease grow, more dietitians are making digestive health a focus.

What resources would you recommend for employers and employees looking for more information?

The Digestive Health Foundation is a wonderful source of information, as is the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation and the Gluten Intolerance Group.