

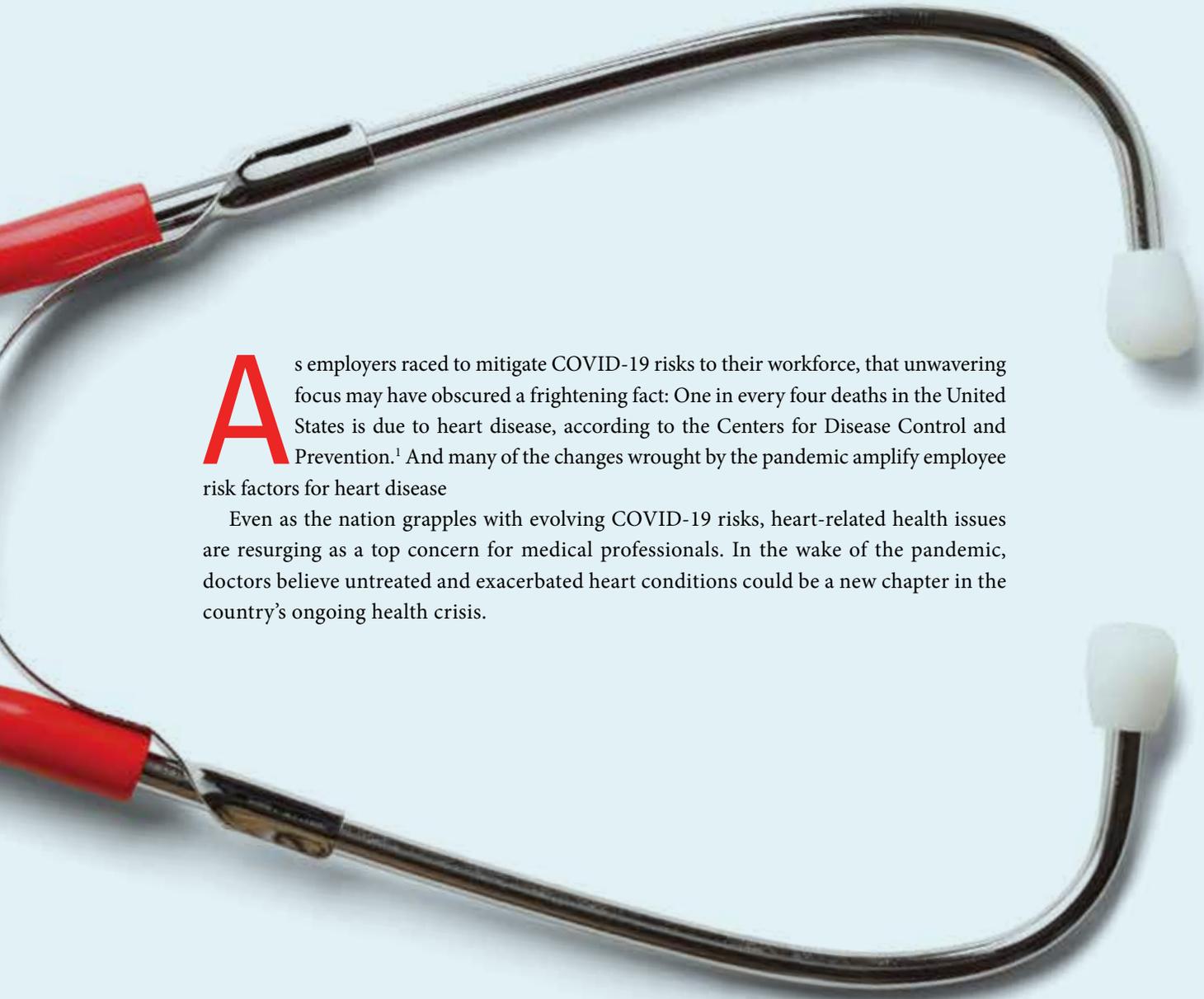


Factors such as lack of treatment and preventive care during the pandemic as well as an increase in unhealthy behaviors have likely amplified the risks of heart disease for health plan participants.

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Prioritizing Heart Health in the COVID-Era Workplace

by | Michael J. Menen, M.D.



As employers raced to mitigate COVID-19 risks to their workforce, that unwavering focus may have obscured a frightening fact: One in every four deaths in the United States is due to heart disease, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.¹ And many of the changes wrought by the pandemic amplify employee risk factors for heart disease

Even as the nation grapples with evolving COVID-19 risks, heart-related health issues are resurging as a top concern for medical professionals. In the wake of the pandemic, doctors believe untreated and exacerbated heart conditions could be a new chapter in the country's ongoing health crisis.

Future-facing benefits leaders would be wise to open the aperture beyond the pandemic and recognize the importance of employee heart health. Heart disease is identified by many health care organizations as a public health crisis, and putting it in the organizational crosshairs is imperative to protecting both the health of workers and the health of the benefits plan.

Risk, Amplified

Data from the past year shows that the pandemic changed how people dealt with their health overall—and heart conditions specifically. A 2021 Cleveland Clinic survey found that only 63% of patients with heart disease sought medical care after a concerning health issue during the COVID-19 outbreak.² And one in three put off taking heart medications, primarily out of worry about going to the doctor during the pandemic.

The earlier that heart patients are treated, the better their outcomes are likely to be. However, hospitals saw a significant decrease in the number of

stroke and heart attack patients being diagnosed during the pandemic.³ This lack of treatment and preventive care could have long-term health implications that are just starting to be documented.

Further, many patients who have recovered from COVID-19 have lingering cardiovascular symptoms to contend with. While the evidence is not yet conclusive, experts are concerned that COVID survivors could face an increased risk of heart failure and other complications for months or years to come.⁴

This is particularly concerning when paired with the stress caused by the pandemic and subsequent return to work. Stress puts added pressure on the heart by activating the body's fight-or-flight response, which can elevate blood pressure, disrupt sleep patterns and worsen hypertension.⁵ If these symptoms go unchecked for weeks, months or even years, they can leave their mark on the person's heart. If a heart is already weakened due to an unchecked medical condition, the impact can be more severe.

The pandemic has also had an outsized impact on the daily habits of Americans. Gyms and recreational areas shut down in many places, making it harder for people to actively manage their weight and get the exercise they need. It's no surprise that 42% of Americans—and 47% of heart disease patients—gained weight during the pandemic.⁶ Further, the stress and boredom of isolation led many to engage in more unhealthy behaviors such as smoking and drinking, which can also harm the heart.

This means that health plans could see an uptick in the number of workers dealing with heart conditions. Employers need to understand the magnitude of this risk and how they can manage it to keep their employees healthy.

But with so many factors putting heart health at risk, how can benefits leaders truly make a difference for plan participants? It starts with understanding what people need in this unprecedented time—then giving them tools and resources that will help them improve their health outcomes. As employees adapt to a new lifestyle impacted by the pandemic, employers can take simple steps to create a more heart-healthy workplace, whether their employees work in an office or from their homes.

1. Get the Word Out

COVID continues to be top of mind for many employees—for good reason. But in addition to emails about vaccine reminders and COVID protocol updates, benefits leaders must remind employees that staying healthy means more than avoiding COVID.

Employers should consider centering a wellness communications campaign around heart health or making it a top

takeaways

- One in every four deaths in the United States is due to heart disease, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and many of the changes wrought by the pandemic amplify employee risk factors for heart disease.
- Many patients with heart disease put off medical care even after a concerning health issue during the COVID-19 outbreak, and some delayed taking heart medications. Some employees also may have become unhealthier during the pandemic by gaining weight, ceasing regular exercise, or smoking or drinking more heavily.
- Employers that want to increase awareness of heart health should consider communication programs targeting heart health or incorporating heart health into an overall wellness campaign.
- Employees' overall wellness, including their mental health, should be considered when designing programs to support heart health. Meditation and mindfulness programs, for example, teach employees how to manage stress.
- Digital tools, interactive apps, coaching and incentive programs can help employees develop healthy habits and monitor their health.

driver for a larger campaign on embracing healthy lifestyle habits. These campaigns can bring employee attention back to the tools and programs they may already have access to that support heart health as well as any new offerings the company has rolled out.

If heart health has moved down an organization's communications priority list during the pandemic, making it a new priority requires intentional and consistent communication.

2. Take a Holistic View of Heart Health

Good heart health is tied to every aspect of a person's life. In addition to genetics, other key factors in defining heart health include diet, exercise, sleep patterns and overall mental health. That means workers' overall wellness needs to be considered when employers want to support heart health—as well as what may be getting in the way of taking time for self-care.

For example, the stress of the pandemic has led to a surge in anxiety and depression, with 42% of Americans reporting symptoms in December 2020—up 11% from the previous year, before the pandemic.⁷ These types of mental health conditions can make basic healthy behaviors like eating right and exercising seem impossible and increase the frequency of unhealthy behaviors like drinking alcohol and smoking.

Many employers have made this connection and are offering more benefits aimed at supporting mental health. For instance, a Silicon Valley developer of writing software⁸ has introduced virtual meditation sessions; fitness, yoga and nutrition videos; and counseling sessions for stress to help its employees cope. A large health insurer provides its employees free access to an on-demand anxiety, stress and depression app that helps connect people with mental health support.

And these types of programs can produce very positive results. In fact, the American Heart Association recently released a statement that connects optimism and heart health—showing that people who maintain a sense of hope and confidence have a decreased risk of certain heart conditions.⁹ The statement also linked mindfulness to lower cardiovascular risk.

Mindfulness is a type of meditation that helps practitioners reduce stress by living in the moment. Mindfulness classes and coaches help people learn how to regulate their breathing and engage their senses to become more aware of their thoughts and accept their feelings. This practice has been shown to be effective in helping people manage stress,

pain, anxiety, depression, insomnia and high blood pressure, which makes it a great way to promote heart health. Companies can encourage mindfulness practices in the workplace by offering a meditation room, daily mindfulness sessions or access to online tools that provide mindfulness resources.

3. Change the Daily Grind

Long-term health goals like losing weight, quitting smoking or eating well can be easy to lose sight of in the chaos of daily life. Digital tools that let employees monitor their health and improve their habits can empower them to make better choices as they race through the week.

Digital tools can be particularly helpful in managing heart health since daily behavior is such an important piece of the puzzle. When people use technology to track their diet, exercise or daily cigarettes, it's easier for them to see how their choices impact their health—and then make necessary changes.

Plus, interactive apps can make developing healthy behaviors easier, more engaging and even fun. Digital trackers give employees accurate, real-time information, and these tools help reduce the stress involved with behavior change as well.

Accountability also goes a long way toward helping people meet their goals. One recent study of a 15-week weight loss program found that people who had a “buddy” to check in with were more likely to lose weight than those without buddy support.¹⁰ Plans can help provide that type of accountability by offering lifestyle coaching.

One-on-one and group coaching sessions can help employees develop healthy habits by creating an environment where they are encouraged—and held accountable—for their choices. Coaches can also connect people with resources and step-by-step plans that can empower them to make big changes in their lives and stay committed to heart health for the long term.

4. Offer Extra Incentives

Everyone likes to be recognized and rewarded for a job well done. Offering incentives to employees who reach certain heart health goals can motivate them to make better choices more consistently. And giving people something to work toward makes it easier for them to create new habits.

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, 84% of large employers offering health benefits in 2019 also offered a workplace wellness program, such as those that help people

bio



Michael J. Menen, M.D., FACC, is national chief medical officer, cardiovascular and pulmonary diseases at Optum, a health services and innovation company that is part of UnitedHealth Group. Optum's employer solutions connect employees with relevant health and wellness programs that address common health concerns including heart health. Based in Richmond, Virginia, Menen earned his M.D. degree at the Medical College of Wisconsin. He is a board-certified invasive cardiologist and fellow of the American College of Cardiology where he is a member of the Heart Disease Prevention Section.

lose weight or stop smoking or provide lifestyle and behavioral coaching.¹¹ And many of those companies offer incentives to encourage employees to participate. For example, among companies whose wellness program included a health assessment, almost a third (32%) offered an incentive for employees to complete it. This compares with 14% in 2008.

Incentives can be participation-based, progress-based or results-based, depending on what type of behavior a company is trying to encourage as well as the particular state and federal regulations that govern its incentives program. If the goal is to get all employees to do a specific task, like complete a health assessment, it would make sense to offer a small participation incentive such as entry into a sweepstakes to win gift cards. For meeting longer term goals like hitting their target BMI or going without nicotine for three months, companies may decide to focus on larger results-based rewards, like a paid day off or a digital fitness tracker.

Keeping Heart Health Top of Mind

Giving employees the tools they need to manage their heart health goes a long way—but employers need to stay engaged to produce positive long-term results. Even the best wellness programs can fall short if employees are unsure how to access and use their benefits. That's why frequent communication and building a culture of health are key to spurring adoption and inspiring people to stay committed to their goals.

Some health plans or employers publish a regular workplace wellness newsletter that highlights individual success

stories from heart health champions, heart-healthy recipes, ongoing office challenges and other information that will keep employees thinking about their hearts. The prospect of being featured in companywide communications can also motivate employees to set and reach more impressive goals.

Whether it's a custom employee portal or an app, it's helpful for employers to consolidate all relevant information about wellness benefits—giving special treatment to offerings that promote heart health. Having a single source of information that employees can refer to and that the benefits team can regularly share makes it easier for people to jump-start their wellness journey.

The road to heart health can be rocky, and the climb is longer for some than for others. Offering digital tools, personalized coaching, reward programs and general wellness programs, along with a strong communications plan that builds awareness and promotes a culture of health, can provide the support that employees need to stay on the right path. 📌

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