Financial incentives don't spur employee weight loss, study finds
Workplace wellness programs must get more creative, researchers say

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Financial rewards meant to encourage obese employees to lose weight don't work, a new study finds.

Many large U.S. companies offer reduced health insurance premiums or other financial incentives to entice workers to adopt healthy lifestyles and shed excess pounds, the University of Pennsylvania researchers said.

But their study of 197 obese employees concluded that more creative incentives might better lead to changes in behavior.

"There is often a presumption that the size of the reward is all that matters," said Dr. Kevin Volpp, director of the Penn Center for Health Incentives and Behavioral Economics. "In reality, incentive systems vary in effectiveness according to how well they are designed," he explained in a university news release.

Participants were enrolled in workplace wellness programs and given a 5 percent weight-loss goal. They were randomly assigned to a control group with no financial incentive to lose weight, or to one of three programs each offering a weight-loss incentive valued at $550.

Two of the programs offered health insurance premium reductions, and the third featured participation in a daily lottery.

After 12 months, no significant changes in average weight loss were observed among any of the four groups, according to the study published in the January issue of the journal Health Affairs.

"More than 80 percent of large employers use financial incentives for health promotion," Dr. Mitesh Patel, an assistant professor of medicine and health care management, said in the news release. "Many use health insurance premium adjustments, but these incentives are often delayed and, even when they aren't, they are typically hidden in paychecks along with other deductions and payments."

Patel and his colleagues said the findings suggest that employers should consider testing alternatives to the $550 premium-based incentives used in this study.

Volpp added that "in this case, premium adjustments had little impact on weight, and the lottery incentives we used were constrained by having to do weigh-ins in workplace settings. That made sustained engagement and behavior change more challenging."
Though study participants didn’t experience significant weight loss, that doesn’t mean that all incentive programs are ineffective, the researchers said.

Under the Affordable Care Act, often called "Obamacare," companies can use up to 30 percent of health insurance premiums -- about $1,800 for the average worker -- to encourage employees to adopt healthy lifestyles.

More information
The American Academy of Family Physicians has more about healthy living.