**Could Your Employees Be At Risk for Heart Disease?**

With the startling prevalence of heart disease in the United States, it’s crucial that employers start addressing the importance of heart health in the workplace. According to a 2017 update by the [American College of Cardiology](http://www.acc.org/latest-in-cardiology/ten-points-to-remember/2017/02/09/14/58/heart-disease-and-stroke-statistics-2017) (ACC), cardiovascular disease accounts for approximately 800,000 deaths in the U.S each year. This is about one out of every three deaths. Unfortunately, the amount of adults with heart disease is estimated to continue to rise in the upcoming years.

A [recent study](http://www.heart.org/idc/groups/heart-public/@wcm/@adv/documents/downloadable/ucm_491543.pdf) by the American Heart Association (AHA) revealed that heart disease might cost up to $1 trillion annually by the year 2035. The study projected that by 2035, 45% of the total U.S. population will have at least one health complication related to heart disease. The study also reported that the ongoing rise of obesity and diabetes affecting the nation is a contributing factor to the estimated increase of heart disease.

The AHA study projects that by the year 2035:

* More than 123 million Americans will have high blood pressure
* More than 11 million will have a stroke
* About 24 million will be diagnosed with coronary heart disease
* Almost 9 million will have congestive heart failure
* More than 7 million will have atrial fibrillation (a serious heart rhythm disorder)

In observance of [American Heart Month](http://info.totalwellnesshealth.com/blog/get-your-office-heart-healthy-with-the-movewithheart-pledge), this might be a good time to spread awareness of the risk factors of heart disease to your employees. Below are some of the top controllable risk factors for heart disease – and some tips for what employers can do about it.

**Smoking**

Smoking cigarettes has been said to be one of the most preventable causes of premature death in the U.S. Almost 20% of all deaths from heart disease are directly related to cigarette smoking. According to the [AHA](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/HealthyLiving/QuitSmoking/QuittingResources/Smoking-Cardiovascular-Disease_UCM_305187_Article.jsp#.Wo2vxBPwZTY), smoking increases blood pressure, decreases exercise tolerance, decreases HDL cholesterol (the good cholesterol), and increases the tendency for blood to clot. Employers can help employees reduce their risk of heart disease from cigarette smoking by:

* Providing employees with a smoking cessation program
* Rewarding employees who quit smoking
* Holding educational sessions about the benefits of living tobacco-free

**Obesity**

As of 2016, more than [one-third](https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/adult.html) (or 36.5%) of U.S. adults are obese. [Research](http://fortune.com/2017/10/13/obesity-in-america/) by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has shown record numbers of Americans being obese – and this number is only continuing to climb. An employee that is 20% or more above their ideal weight is at a higher risk for a host of health problems that are linked to heart disease – including high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and type 2 diabetes.

While weight loss is a touchy subject for many people, employers can still help [encourage better eating](http://info.totalwellnesshealth.com/blog/how-to-encourage-healthy-eating-in-your-employee-wellness-program-0) and exercise habits in the workplace. Employers can do this by:

* Replacing vending machines with healthy vending machines (filled with [healthy snacks](http://info.totalwellnesshealth.com/blog/10-healthy-foods-to-snack-on-during-work) like nuts, plain Greek yogurt, dried fruit, 100% whole-grain crackers, and hummus)
* Supplying [healthy choices](http://info.totalwellnesshealth.com/blog/host-a-healthy-office-potluck) at company luncheons, parties, and meetings
* Hosting the [Real Food Challenge](http://info.totalwellnesshealth.com/blog/help-your-employees-eatreal-with-the-real-food-challenge)
* Providing educational resources and healthy eating tips (ideas for [meal prepping](http://info.totalwellnesshealth.com/blog/how-to-meal-prep-for-your-workweek), healthy recipes, [mindful eating techniques](http://info.totalwellnesshealth.com/blog/learn-how-to-eat-mindfully))
* On-gym or gym membership discounts
* Walking clubs
* Step challenges
* Providing [standing desks](http://info.totalwellnesshealth.com/blog/make-your-own-standing-desk)

**Chronic Stress**

If ignored, high levels of stress can lead to emotional, psychological, and even physical problems, including chest pains, irregular heartbeats, and high blood pressure – which can all increase the risk of heart disease. While some stress is normal in a workplace environment, employers can still help employees reduce their stress levels by:

* Providing on-site massages
* Creating a [flexible work environment](http://info.totalwellnesshealth.com/blog/can-flexible-schedules-really-improve-employee-wellbeing) (ability to work from home or work flexible hours)
* Encouraging employees to use their PTO
* Offering [mental health days](http://info.totalwellnesshealth.com/blog/tips-for-taking-a-mental-health-day-off)
* Hosting lunch-and-learn sessions with a healthcare professional to help employees learn to better cope with stress
* Daily meditation
* On-site yoga instructor
* Providing discounts for counseling or therapy services

**Diabetes**

According to the [ACC](http://www.acc.org/latest-in-cardiology/ten-points-to-remember/2017/02/09/14/58/heart-disease-and-stroke-statistics-2017), approximately 23.4 million American adults have diabetes, while an estimated 7.6 million have undiagnosed diabetes. Adults with diabetes are [two to four times more likely](http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/More/Diabetes/WhyDiabetesMatters/Cardiovascular-Disease-Diabetes_UCM_313865_Article.jsp/#.Wo26ehPwZTY) to have heart disease or a stroke than adults without diabetes. This is because diabetes can cause high blood pressure, abnormal cholesterol, high triglycerides, obesity, and a lack of physical activity. All of which can great increase the risk of heart disease.

Employers can help spread awareness of type 2 diabetes prevention by:

* Educating employees on the importance of regular exercise and a balanced diet
* Hosting [annual biometric screenings](https://www.totalwellnesshealth.com/biometric-screening/) to test blood glucose levels
* Providing educational resources on diabetes

**High Blood Pressure**

An estimated [85.7 million](http://www.acc.org/latest-in-cardiology/ten-points-to-remember/2017/02/09/14/58/heart-disease-and-stroke-statistics-2017) Americans (or 34% of the population) have [high blood pressure](http://info.totalwellnesshealth.com/blog/what-do-the-new-blood-pressure-guidelines-mean-for-employee-wellness). High blood pressure can lead to an increased risk of coronary artery disease and heart attack. The good news about high blood pressure is that it can be easily detected and lowered with a few lifestyle changes or medication (if prescribed by a doctor). Employers can help employees lower their blood pressure by:

* Hosting annual biometric screenings to test blood pressure
* Addressing and lowering stress levels in the office
* Promoting [regular exercise](http://info.totalwellnesshealth.com/blog/heres-why-you-want-your-employees-to-move-more)
* Providing educational resources for ways to keep blood pressure in check

**High Cholesterol**

High levels of LDL cholesterol (the bad type of cholesterol) are associated with a higher risk of heart disease. According to the [ACC](http://www.acc.org/latest-in-cardiology/ten-points-to-remember/2017/02/09/14/58/heart-disease-and-stroke-statistics-2017), an estimated one out of every three U.S. adults has elevated low-density lipoprotein cholesterol levels. Too much cholesterol in the blood can cause build-up in the arteries. This leads to atherosclerosis, which is a serious form of heart disease. Employers can help employees lower their LDL cholesterol by:

* Providing [heart-healthy choices](http://info.totalwellnesshealth.com/blog/want-a-healthier-heart-eat-these-heart-healthy-foods) in the office kitchens and break rooms (fresh fruit, veggies, whole-grains, healthy fats)
* Hosting annual biometric screenings to test cholesterol levels
* Encouraging employees with high cholesterol to speak with a nutritionist or other healthcare professional

Be sure your employees are educated about the controllable risk factors that can lead to heart disease. Employees should also be encouraged to attend annual preventative checkups and consult with a healthcare professional if they have any of the above risk factors of heart disease. When it comes to heart disease, remember that [prevention is key](http://info.totalwellnesshealth.com/blog/start-focusing-on-prevention-in-your-employee-wellness-program). Maintaining a healthy diet, exercising regularly, and living tobacco-free are some of the best ways to keep a healthy heart.