

Do you want to increase productivity by 20% and avoid the mid-afternoon energy slump?



Nutrition in the workplace - an introduction

Many UK workers place healthy eating at the back of their minds when getting to work and during their hours in the office.

*Nutrition is more than simply about health - in the workplace it's a solution to boost productivity and avoid the mid-afternoon energy slump. **Alison Clark, Registered Dietitian**, provides us with an insight.*

Introduction

The Department of Health has stated that '*workplaces are often under-utilised as a setting for promoting health and wellbeing*', but fortunately more organisations are showing an interest in the health of their employees in the workplace to encourage them to stay healthier for longer¹. After all, healthier employees equal more productivity, which in turn equals return on investment, so the importance of watching what we eat and eating healthily remains a priority.

Eating habits at work

We spend a majority of our time at work but are we really mindful of what we eat during that time? In the current economic downturn, some people might feel they should be working longer hours, without breaks, in order to maintain their position at work; full time UK employees work longer hours than most of their European Union counterparts². What might this current scenario mean for the nation's health?

'Poor meal programs and poor nutrition underlie so many workplace issues: morale, safety, productivity, and the long-term health of the workers and nations'³.

This concerning quote is taken from the first study to investigate global workplace eating habits, and it is increasingly apparent that there is an unhealthy approach to nutrition in UK workplaces.

When people arrive at work, snacking '*al-desko*' is an all too familiar sight, with no time taken for a proper break away from the office. A recent poll by ComRes, conducted on behalf of BBC Breakfast, suggests that a staggering 54% of office workers regularly work rather than take a proper lunch break.⁴ Further, 52% of those surveyed indicated a widespread culture of working through lunch breaks. These figures are certainly worrying as these behaviours can negatively impact on health.

Potential health implications of snacking 'al-desko'

Negative health implications can include a lack of exposure to sunshine and therefore a potential risk of low vitamin D status, hypoglycaemia as well as increased body weight due to an increased likelihood of snacking on high sugar/fat foods.

Vitamin D – impacting on mood and anxiety

If employees are working through lunch and therefore indoors, their exposure to sunlight will

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be significantly reduced which will increase their risk of low vitamin D status⁵. This is especially true during the key months of April to September when the sun's rays are strong enough in the UK for vitamin D production. Vitamin D is essential not only for bone health, but the latest evidence implicates low status with numerous poor health outcomes including heart disease, diabetes and depression^{6,7}.

Hypoglycaemia and poor quality snacking

If employees are working through lunch breaks without refuelling, it will compromise their blood sugar levels, leading to energy lows. This increases temptations to visit the vending machines or purchase sweet snacks to boost falling blood sugar levels. A recent survey carried out by the British Heart Foundation, reported that office workers often relied on chocolate and caffeine to boost their energy levels⁸. In addition, The Co-operative Food recently commissioned research into office eating habits in the UK. It was found that 24% of those surveyed said they were unable to resist unhealthy celebratory food at work and on average, office workers will eat a sweet snack by 10.04am. Chocolate, crisps, cakes and biscuits were found to be the biggest temptations⁹.

Workplace Health Schemes – a viable solution

Workplace health schemes are one positive way to try to address the workplace nutritional and health concerns highlighted so far. Although the terms for these schemes vary, they typically focus on certain health issues, for example, work/life balance, stress and optimal nutrition/healthy eating. These schemes are increasing around the world, and for good reasons¹⁰.

Available evidence supports the positive impact of these schemes in terms of worker productivity and health, which is great news for employer and employee alike.

Workplace Health Works!

- 27% reduction in ill health absence¹¹
- A review of 55 UK workplace health schemes in 2008 found a range of benefits such as reduced ill health absence, lower staff turnover and increased employee satisfaction¹²
- Some employers noted £3 return on an investment of £119

The impact of a Workplace Health Scheme – a case study

AC Health and Nutrition Ltd (ACHN) was set up in 2005 to support the demand for good nutrition and health in the workplace and has worked with clients nationwide including Morgan Stanley, UBS and councils. In a nutshell, ACHN provides straightforward and practical advice, which employees can easily incorporate into their working day. Employees are offered knowledge and practical tips on food and nutrition so they can live healthier lives. Essentially ACHN helps people learn how to fuel their bodies effectively to get the most out of their day.

How we stimulate and excite employees to take action

Practical every day tips are always popular with employees and one of the most popular activities is a food demonstration using everyday ingredients, which can be kept in a desk

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drawer and only a bowl is needed – this means that it is practical in the workplace and great for the many that hate washing up!

Also popular are interactive nutrition seminars ranging from '**Good Mood Food**' to '**How to sustain yourself throughout a busy working day – the healthy way!**' These workshops educate employees on how nutrition can boost mood and offers practical suggestions on how to eat healthier food (which still tastes good!). The workshops aim is to empower employees to change their eating and drinking behaviours.

In 2011-12, 10.4 million working days were lost through stress, depression and anxiety and, according to the British Dietetic Association, a good diet can protect people's mental health.

The '**Good Mood Food**' seminars empower individuals to learn how they can effectively manage their mood with optimal food and nutrition using foods providing 'feel good vitamins and minerals' associated with improved energy, mood and concentration levels. Good nutrition has also been shown to raise productivity by 20%^{13, 14}.



In summary

The evidence shows that poor eating habits in the workplace is a common occurrence and this is impacting on the nation's physical and mental health, which in turn impacts on the economy. Workplace health schemes have a proven track record to help thwart and possibly reverse this trend and positively impact on sickness absence, lower staff turnover, and higher productivity¹⁵.

Improving your team's healthy eating habits at work

Easy things we can all do for free...

Ensure fruit (fresh and dried), nuts and seeds are available in your office and at meetings start a small kitty and a rota for who's responsible for bringing in the goods

Talk to the catering team to establish a healthy dish of the day and ask if this could be the cheapest option on the menu

Stock up on a variety of healthy cereals in the office for those who never have time to have breakfast – and ensure there are always bowls and spoons at the ready

Encourage colleagues to bring in healthy snacks for celebrations, rather than the traditional high sugar, high fat cake

Talk to your colleagues who are responsible for the health and wellbeing of employees and ask if there is a budget for workplace health schemes

If so, do your research on which professional service providers you use and ensure they are regulated and insured.

Help is at hand for your colleagues and employees: The ACHN experts in workplace health schemes are more than happy to offer guidance. Please email alison@achn.co.uk - or go to www.achn.co.uk.

References - Nutrition in the workplace



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