

Clearing the Air in Texas

Employees want employers to offer smoking cessation coverage



Open the newspaper or turn on the television, and you will learn about another city considering anti-smoking measures. At the State Capitol this spring, lawmakers took up a statewide smoking ban, although the measure failed to reach the governor's desk.

Wherever you turn, there is increasing pressure on smokers to quit, yet little is being done to help smokers quit. Smoking is more than just a "bad habit;" it is a chronic, relapsing medical condition that poses a tremendous medical and economic burden to individuals, their families and employers.¹

Tobacco use, including smoking, is also the leading cause of preventable death in the United States. Every year, roughly 440,000 Americans die as a result of smoking—that's one in five deaths annually in the U.S.² Not only do smokers have a higher number of chronic health issues, but if you have a family member or friend who lights up odds are you may also suffer from chronic health issues from smoking or second-hand smoke, too.³ From cardiopulmonary diseases like chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) to heart disease and stroke, smoking takes its toll on our health and our pocketbooks.

Yet, employers and governments often seem more preoccupied with outlawing or heavily restricting smoking rather than arming people with the effective tools and resources they need to quit.

A recent survey by the National Business Group on Health shows that establishing smoke-free workplaces alone is not enough to prompt most smokers (78 percent) to quit.⁴ Employees without smoking cessation benefits said what they most want is for their employer to support them by offering smoking cessation coverage. While many employees want smoking cessation coverage, however, few raise the need for it with their employers.

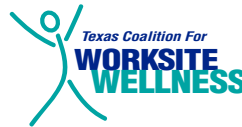
Today, Texas state employees are provided a wide-range of prevention and wellness benefits through their ERS health plan, but smoking cessation treatment and drug therapies are unfortunately not yet included. It's a bit surprising that more public and private sector employers do not offer the benefit when you consider smoking cessation treatment is one of the most cost-effective health care benefits available, tied with aspirin therapy and childhood immunizations, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).⁵

A good model for employers on what smoking cessation benefits should be covered comes from the CDC. Their established guidelines for smoking cessation benefits include at least four counseling sessions of at least 30 minutes each; coverage of both prescription and over-the-counter medications; coverage for at least two quit attempts each year; and, limited or no co-pays for counseling and medications.

Perhaps it's time we empowered and equipped smokers with information, access to treatments and effective prescription drug therapies to help smokers quit successfully.

Quitting smoking is still the best thing you can do for your health and the health of your family. If we're going to truly clear the air, quitting smoking and ensuring that all workers in Texas have smoking cessation benefits are proven, cost-effective ways to get us there.

About the Texas Coalition for Worksite Wellness



The Texas Coalition for Worksite Wellness is a program of the Texas Business Group on Health (TBGH), one of the state's leading voices on health care and business issues. TCWW strives to improve Texans' health, prevent costly disease and lower health care costs. TCWW believes a healthier Texas workforce produces a stronger, fiscally healthier Texas in the global marketplace. More information is available online at www.txworksitewellness.org.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Rigotti NA. Treatment of tobacco use and dependence. *New England Journal of Medicine*. 2002; 346:506-512.
- 2 American Lung Association Epidemiology and Statistics Unit Research and Program Services. *Trends in Tobacco Use*. 2007. Available at <http://www.lungusa.org/site/pp.asp?c=dvLUK9O0E&b=33347> (Viewed Aug. 24, 2007).
- 3 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *The Health Consequences of Involuntary Exposure to Tobacco Smoke: A Report of the Surgeon General*. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Office on Smoking and Health; 2006.
- 4 National Business Group on Health. *New Insights for Employers on the Value of Smoking Cessation and Practical Guidance for Action*. 2007.
- 5 National Business Group on Health and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention-Center for Prevention and Health Services. *Reducing the Burden of Smoking on Employee Health and Productivity*. Washington, D.C. 2003.

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