



Should Companies Screen Nicotine Levels?

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that each smoker costs the economy \$1,623 annually in increased medical expenditures and another \$1,760 in lost productivity. The American Lung Association of Wisconsin reports economic costs related to smoking in the state are in excess of \$3 billion dollars per year; and 20.8 percent of adults, 19.9 percent of high school students and 5.8 percent of middle school students smoke.

While it has become routine for employers to restrict smoking at the workplace, testing employees to determine their smoking status is getting more attention from Wisconsin companies. As healthcare costs continue to rise, employers are focusing on the role of tobacco in spending.

On average, smokers die 10 years earlier than non-smokers.

Carrot or stick

Some wellness practitioners question if nicotine testing is worth the expenses. Are there more effective ways to address the smoking issue? A good place to start may be to ask a more important question: What is it that you hope to accomplish? For most businesses, banning smoking is not just about saving money; it is also about building a healthier workforce. Some feel that mandatory testing may build a wall of fear and resentment, which makes healthy transitions more difficult.

If you want to know if employees smoke, why not just ask them? Experience in wellness programming tells us that most people who smoke want to quit. Self-reporting, even with obvious shortcomings, it may be far more effective in building a healthy wellness culture. It is not as invasive as the testing, and may produce the same or better results.

The data shows that individual assessment, when combined with behavioral interventions (smoking cessation programs, support groups, wellness coaching and cost coverage for nicotine replacement) and pharmacological therapy have high rates of success. This positive approach, which shifts the accountability to the employee without the emotionality of judgment, has been shown to help employees successfully change unwanted behavior in the long term.

For assistance in developing a more smoking cessation program for your employees, contact Sharon Rateike, corporate wellness program coordinator at (920) 568-5018 or Sharon.Rateike@forthc.com.

