

Firms push workers to shape up

By ELLEN SIMON, The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Many companies are starting to sound like moms: They're pushing employees to eat their vegetables and go outside and play. And they're not being gentle about it.

Outdoor-clothing company L.L. Bean shuts down its manufacturing line three times a day for mandatory five-minute stretches, designed to prevent the most common injuries the workers suffer.

"It's a safety measure, just as we would ask someone to wear safety glasses if there's a danger of hurting their eyes," said Susan Tufts, the company's employee-wellness-program manager.

At retailer Replacements Ltd., 250 employees take part in a walking program organized by the company nurse. T-shirt manufacturer American Apparel has 80 loaner bikes, locks and helmets for employees and hosted an employee screening of "Fast Food Nation," a film in which the villain is the meat industry.

The Hartford Financial Services Group is among those using price manipulation in its cafeteria to encourage employees to eat right. It's increasing the prices on fatty foods and using the extra money to subsidize healthful sandwiches, fruit and salads.

Such "Twinkie taxes" are now in place at 7 to 10 percent of corporate cafeterias run by food-service company Sodexo, up from almost none three years ago, according to the company.

Mounting health-care costs are driving the changes.

While some companies are responding to the higher health-care cost by cutting employees' coverage and shifting more costs to the employees, others are doing everything they can to persuade employees to adopt healthier habits in the hopes they will avoid diseases caused or complicated by eating poorly and being overweight or inactive.

After L.L. Bean increased the price for burgers and lowered the price for salads in its cafeteria, fruit and salad-bar purchases doubled while French-fry and burger sales fell by half.

When railroad company Union Pacific opened a new headquarters in Omaha, Neb., two years ago, it ordered its cafeteria operator to hire a full-time dietitian for the site and cut the fat and calories on every item by 10 percent.

Besides cost cutting, another factor behind the programs is the amount of time employees spend at work.

If workers don't have access to fruits and vegetables on the job, they will need to consume between one and two servings every waking hour after work to meet the goal of eating five to nine servings a day, according to the California Department of Human Services. To reach the

recommended 10,000 steps a day, sedentary workers would have to spend most of their evenings in motion, the department said.

Even a little daily exercise can boost health, said Dr. Antronette Yancey, associate professor at the UCLA School of Public Health.

Yancey collaborated with the Ministry of Health in Mexico, where everyone gathers at 11 a.m. each morning for 10 minutes of exercise to music. The result, after a year, was an average 0.45 pound weight loss — an improvement from the 1 pound a year, on average, people gain as they age.

"Especially as it relates to physical activity, people have demonstrated that they're not going to make a lot of changes on their own," Yancey said. "If we're going to make a big dent — lower health-care costs, improve productivity and morale — you have to make it easier to do than not do."

Yancey and others say that work gyms are used primarily by people who would exercise anyway. For everyone else, a little manipulation goes a long way. Her suggestions include incorporating exercise breaks into the work day, restricting parking close to the building, limiting elevator access to people with disabilities, widening and brightening stairwells and hosting walking meetings.

Price manipulation worked for senior business analyst Kathy Blaszczyk at The Hartford, who started buying a flank steak salad with grilled corn when the price dropped from \$6 to \$4.70.

"I love it, but I never used to get it," she said. "I have in my head a \$5 threshold."

Having the company's top leaders embrace the program also helps.

Dan Cathy, president and chief operating officer of Chick-fil-A restaurants and a runner, has cajoled 265 company employees to run the January Walt Disney World marathon or half-marathon with him.

Most of the runners joining him "have never done anything like that distance-wise," Cathy said of his group. "There's a lot of first timers.

"We live in a time when there really is a health-care crisis. Every segment of society needs to make a contribution."

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