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CNN Health

Company wellness programs improve health, cut costs

By: Alison Harding (September 1st, 2009)

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Prostate cancer

Employee wellness programs just may be the cure for companies struggling to keep up with rapidly rising health care costs.

And proponents say that in addition to saving companies money, the programs are an effective way to help employees live healthier lives.

Jeff and Linda Pond of Virginia even suggest that Linda's company wellness program may have saved Jeff's life.

Two years ago, Pond received a letter informing him that his annual blood test results indicated he might have prostate cancer. The letter advised him to consult his physician on the bottom line.

Pond is now six weeks out of surgery to treat early stage prostate cancer and says things are "back to normal," thanks to Linda's employee wellness program at Quest Diagnostics, which provided the free blood tests that initially detected signs of cancer.

"My cancer would have gone undetected for years, and likely wouldn't have been nearly as treatable as it is," Pond said, adding that early detection saved him from having to go through more intensive -- and expensive -- treatments down the road.

It is this concept of preventative care that spurred the CEO of Quest Diagnostics -- where Linda works as a registered nurse -- to implement the company's wellness program four years ago, said Steve Burton, vice president of health and wellness services at Quest Diagnostics.

The company's voluntary program, Healthy Quest, provides employees, their spouses and domestic partners with a personalized health report -- called Blueprint for Wellness -- based on laboratory testing. The program also provides educational materials, weight-loss support groups, fitness classes, a smoking cessation program and personal counseling sessions. Employees who participate in the free program are given \$10 bi-weekly as an incentive, Burton said.

So what's in it for the company?

Healthy Quest is designed to focus on health issues that "drive a lot of costs, and drive a lot of lost productivity," like obesity, smoking and stress, Burton said. Since Healthy Quest was established, the company has benefited from lower health care costs, fewer sick days and more satisfied employees, he said.

"Through an independent researcher, we determined that for about every dollar that we invest behind Healthy Quest, there's a savings of about \$4.80," Burton said.