It's March. Do you know where your New Year's resolution to get healthy is? If you haven't been as committed as you would have liked to getting in shape or finally giving up smoking, maybe it's time to get the boss involved.

Facing rising health-care costs and an aging workforce, business owners are increasingly adopting wellness programs at work to encourage employees to get fit and stay active longer.

In a 2005/2006 study by Watson Wyatt Worldwide, a global consulting firm with headquarters in Virginia, 41 percent of the 275 businesses surveyed had implemented some form of health and productivity planning in their overall corporate strategy. Another 32 percent had plans to do so within the year. Of both those groups, 75 percent had opted for health promotion programs.

The city of Tucson and Jim Click's auto dealerships are among those with programs to teach employees about being healthy, and on Jan. 5, University Medical Center joined the trend.

That was the kickoff of the hospital's 16-week Healthy Lifestyle Challenge — a competition of sorts, in which employees, volunteers and medical staff win prizes such as paid days off or visits to a resort, all for setting and meeting personal health goals.

"One morning, I was thinking about the fact that we were not meeting our budget figures, and it was because of our health-care costs," said UMC President Greg Pivirotto. He reasoned that if employees could maintain a healthier lifestyle, it would ultimately reduce insurance costs.

The project was turned over to Rob Bailey, manager of the hospital's Wellness Center, and Carol Marulic, director of cardiovascular services.

The challenge, which recently passed its halfway point, comprises three components: exercise, smoking-cessation, and diet and nutrition, Marulic said.

After an initial assessment with Bailey and the staff at the wellness center, employees choose to focus on any of the components or a combination of the three.

Based upon their personal goals, the team helps them create a plan of action and has participants checking in weekly to record their progress, Bailey explained.

At the end of four months, participants take a series of physical endurance tests to determine how far they've come.

When the challenge launched, Bailey was expecting maybe 500 people to enroll. Nearly 1,000 did, about one-third of UMC's total workforce.

**Resources to check out**

Here are a few sites to learn more about health promotion programs in the workplace and community:

- UA's Center for Physical Activity and Nutrition, www.cpan.arizona.org
- Wellness Councils of America, www.welcoa.org
- The Tucson Challenge, sponsored by the city of Tucson, www.ci.tucson.az.us/tucsonchallenge
Yolanda Gil, 51, and Vivian Stawarz, 44, are two who joined the program back in January. Since starting the program, Gil, a registered nurse, said she's lost about 11 pounds and 4 inches from her waist. Additionally, she's noticed a change in her level of strength and energy.

"I could never do a push-up before, and now I can do 10," she said, still expressing amazement at her accomplishment. "I am a 51-year old grandma who can now do push-ups!"

Over the past year, trauma nurse Stawarz has lost 25 pounds, 12 of them on the challenge.

Getting in shape had "always been in the back of my mind," she said. "My goal is to get into a pair of jeans I wore several years ago. I have them on a hanger and hooked up onto my wall. I've got two more sizes to go."

For both Gil and Stawarz, the support provided by something like the challenge has been crucial to their success.

"There are a lot of us in the ER, and a lot of us are doing it (the healthy challenge)," Stawarz said. "It's actually bringing us closer together. To me, it's like a social event."

Over time, businesses that employ similar health initiatives have benefited from a drop in absenteeism, higher productivity and a decline in health-care costs, according to a University of Michigan study.

Still, not every company is jumping on board. "For smaller businesses, their budgets are often so tight that they're really fretful about putting money into prevention because they're not sure it's a tangible investment for them," said Lauve Metcalfe, director of program development outreach at the University of Arizona's Center for Physical Activity and Nutrition.

"By having opportunities at the worksite, it makes it easier and more accessible for people to participate in them," she said.

But implementing a health-promotion program must be an ongoing commitment. "It's not just 12 weeks and you're done," Metcalfe said. "You need to be realistic about what kind of outcome you can have."

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