Reducing costs, improving lives

Research shows about 40 percent of all health care expenses in the U.S. stem from preventable chronic illnesses that are most often caused by three lifestyle choices: physical inactivity, poor diet and tobacco use, according to the Cleveland Clinic.

At the same time, the Affordable Care Act is forcing employers’ hands to offer health care to all workers or pay a penalty, and with that pressure comes the heightened desire to control costs. What if there were a way to reduce costs while improving employees’ productivity and overall well-being? That’s where workplace wellness comes into play.

I hear about wellness all the time from my sister Gina. In addition to being one of my best friends, a half-marathon runner and a supermom to my 18-month-old nephew, Andy, she’s a client wellness coordinator for Gallagher Benefits Services and a former wellness program manager for a major manufacturer. She knows a thing or two about getting employees healthy and the importance of doing so.

Consider that medical costs fall by about $2.73 for every dollar spent, according to a 2010 report published by the journal Health Affairs.

These ROI measures are reason enough to take a look at wellness programming, but that doesn’t mean implementing such efforts is easy, as my sister sees firsthand in her work.

That’s why I turned to her for a few simple ideas any company can use. Here are some of her thoughts.

**Begin with free.** Gina says most insurance carriers offer some wellness offerings, such as a tobacco quit line, discounts to weight-loss programs and the like, but many employees don’t take advantage of them. Start by finding out what’s available to your firm and promoting those internally. Don’t forget about other potentially free resources from groups or associations you belong to. There also may be government funding available. For example, Ohio’s Bureau of Workers’ Compensation offers a wellness grant program.

**Start a wellness committee.** You may be thinking, “This is all great, but I still don’t have time to coordinate it.” Why not delegate some duties to an employee wellness committee? They can brainstorm ideas, create a newsletter or bulletin board and conduct a survey to see what offerings employees would take advantage of if they were available (such as healthy snacks, blood pressure screenings, smoking cessation classes, etc.). Also consider grouping wellness in with safety. Communicating wellness etc.). Also consider grouping wellness screenings, smoking cessation classes, etc.). Also consider grouping wellness in with safety. Communicating wellness with safety. Communicating wellness

**Have a strategy.** A “Biggest Loser” program may be fun and effective on a short-term basis, but is it sustainable and is it achieving long-term goals? Maybe not. Gina recommends a company wellness strategy focusing on the Big 4 areas of tobacco use, nutrition, exercise and stress management. Why? These are the areas linked to preventable chronic illnesses that cost us all so much.