Traveling workers need wellness support

Your Health and Wellness Awareness Program

Traveling for business can strain an employee's mental and physical health, and the impact gets worse the more nights a worker spends away from home.

A recent study conducted by researchers at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health and City University of New York found workers who travel frequently were more likely to be sedentary, report more symptoms of anxiety and depression, and have trouble sleeping.

The study also showed that frequent travelers are more likely to smoke and, if they drink, show symptoms of alcohol dependence.

In addition, there's one more piece of bad news: Earlier studies showed that frequent business travel can bring a higher likelihood of obesity, higher body mass index, and high blood pressure.

"Although business travel can be seen as a job benefit and can lead to occupational advancement, there is a growing literature showing that extensive business travel is associated with risk of chronic disease associated with lifestyle factors," said Andrew Rundle, associate professor of epidemiology at the Mailman School of Public Health.

Finding the link

The recent study, one of the first to report the effects of business travel on non-infectious disease health risks, looked at people who travel for business two weeks or more per month. Their de-identified health assessment responses were compared to those of workers who traveled one to six nights a month. Results were published online in the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine.

Responses from frequent travelers indicated that mild or worse anxiety and depressive symptoms were common in this group. The results also showed that scores relating to symptoms of anxiety or depression, as well as alcohol dependence, rose as the number of nights away from home increased.

The study's findings were consistent with medical claims data from World Bank employees, which showed the largest increase in business traveler claims was for stress-related psychological disorders.

Additional health concerns

An earlier study from Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health also looked at employees who traveled for two weeks or more a month and found that those who traveled the most had poorer health than those who traveled less often.

That study showed that frequent travelers:

- Had a higher body mass index than light travelers,

- Had a lower HDL (good) cholesterol level than light travelers

- Had higher blood pressure than light travelers, and

- Were 260 percent more likely to rate their health as fair to poor compared to light travelers.

Offering assistance

Rundle noted that individual travelers need to take responsibility for their diet, exercise, and alcohol consumption decisions when they're on the road, as well as the amount of sleep they get. However, he pointed out that employers can provide support that will help keep the travelers healthier.

"Employees will likely need support in the form of education, training, and a corporate culture that emphasizes healthy business travel," he said. "Employers should provide employees who travel for business with accommodations that have access to physical activity facilities and healthy food options."