

Study: Job Stress Strongly Associated With Obesity, Illness

On behalf of Johnston, Moore & Thompson

May 21, 2010

In this recession, everyone knows how easy it is to get laid off, and how hard it is to find another job. The economy has pushed workplace stress levels to their highest level in decades. Now, workers' compensation, insurance, and safety professionals are warning employers that there could be serious consequences if they fail to address the problem of stress in the workplace.

Job-related stress has been linked to heart and cardiovascular disease, strokes, metabolic syndrome, exhaustion, depression, anxiety, and other occupational diseases. It has also been shown to increase the risk of back injuries and certain musculoskeletal disorders.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health explains that unresolved work-related stress keeps the body in a state of "activation," increasing the rate of wear and tear on the body and its systems. The body's ability to heal and defend itself from injury can become compromised, increasing disease and injury risks - and the risk of workplace injuries and [workers' compensation](#) claims.

A Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine study demonstrated that workers reporting high levels of stress spent nearly 50 percent more on health care than other workers.

A recent study by the University of Rochester Medical Center has also found that chronic stress on the job is strongly associated with workers becoming overweight or obese.

Epidemiologist and lead author Diana Fernandez explains that stressful working conditions can impact workers' health both directly and indirectly. Stress affects the neuroendocrine system and can decrease sex hormones, both of which can cause weight gain. Stress can also lead to inactivity and eating behaviors that indirectly contribute to weight gain and obesity.

During the course of the study, Fernandez and her team observed anecdotally that, when layoffs were underway, workers chose the snacks that were highest in fat and calories from vending machines. Workers told the team they were afraid to take the time to eat well or exercise over lunch because they didn't know what the consequences might be if they left their desks too long.

"In a poor economy, companies should take care of the people who survive layoffs and end up staying in stressful jobs," said Fernandez in an interview for Risk & Insurance magazine.

Job Conditions That Lead to Higher Stress for Employees

According to RiskandInsurance.com's WORKERSCOMP Forum, employers need to be mindful of these areas that cause work-related stress:

- Heavy workloads, long hours, infrequent rest breaks, shift work, and tasks that give workers little sense of control.
- A management style that limits employees' participation in decision making, poor communication by management, and lack of flexibility toward family needs
- A poor social environment where workers feel unsupported by management and co-workers
- Uncertainty about work roles, accountability or job expectations - or too much responsibility
- Job insecurity and lack of advancement opportunities
- Poor environmental or dangerous working conditions

Related Resources:

- "[Work-Related Stress Poses Risks if Left Unchecked](#)" (RiskandInsurance.com WORKERSCOMP Forum, May 17, 2010)
- "What job conditions lead to stress?" (RiskandInsurance.com WORKERSCOMP Forum, May 17, 2010)