

Best Practices

Gut check: Why employers should invest in employee digestive wellness

Overall, digestive conditions generate \$140 billion in health care costs each year, more than heart disease, trauma and mental health.

By Sam Jactel | October 30, 2023 at 12:01 PM



While employers are increasingly recognizing the importance of employee wellbeing in driving productivity and overall success, there is one important

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health issue that is often overlooked: digestive health. A staggering **70 million** Americans are living with gastrointestinal (GI) diseases. These conditions, including Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS), Crohn's Disease, Ulcerative Colitis (UC) and more, can lead to serious impacts on a GI **patient's personal life with** meaningful bleed-over effects into work productivity and absenteeism. In fact, symptoms can be so severe that GI patients are willing to sacrifice **up to 15 years** of their remaining life expectancy for a cure today.

Digestive issues are expensive

Only recently have **studies shown** just how costly treating GI conditions can be given **1 in 4 Americans are affected**. Overall, digestive conditions generate \$140 billion in health care costs each year, more than heart disease, trauma and mental health. According to an actuarial analysis by **Accorded**, GI patients cost employers 3 to 8 times more than a healthy adult and GI issues are the fourth largest driver of employee-related health care costs.

Managing gut health problems frequently necessitates ongoing medical attention, including doctor visits, specialist consultations, and diagnostic tests, which results in high utilization. Unfortunately, standard approaches to digestive health care often don't address the root causes of discomfort, and patients bounce from clinician to clinician in search of an effective solution.

According to a Fortune 500 employer I recently spoke with, IBS patients among their employees see on average five different GI-related physicians per year, which is consistent with **published data**. Emergency departments report that abdominal pain is the **number one reason** for treat-and-release encounters, constituting around **40 million** ambulatory visits each year. Not only that, but treatments for digestive conditions, especially when considering surgery or therapeutic interventions, can come with substantial per-claim costs. Biologic medications like **Humira** – frequently used to treat Crohn's Disease and other digestive conditions – **cost employees \$80,000** annually and **cost employers a whopping \$15 billion**. This financial burden not only affects the organization's health care spending but also translates into higher insurance premiums for employees.

GI issues affect other aspects of health

As a patient suffering from IBD with a family history of IBS, I know firsthand how living with these conditions generates important overlapping costs and impacts on patients' quality of life. In addition to discomfort and pain, and because the gut is inextricably **linked to the brain**, employees with digestive problems experience diagnosed mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD at **three times the rate of healthy adults**. Of course, this also means patients often experience decreased focus, impacting their productivity at work.

The gut's role in hormonal balance is particularly crucial for women as it influences various aspects of their reproductive health. During menopause, when hormonal shifts are a natural part of the aging process, imbalances in gut health **can cause GI issues to flare** and exacerbate symptoms like hot flashes, mood swings, and weight gain. These symptoms combined lead to increased health care utilization for treatments, prescription medications, and therapies to manage menopausal discomfort.

These intersections underscore the importance of employers addressing gut health as part of their comprehensive wellness initiatives.

The impact to productivity

Employees with GI conditions may also experience health-related workplace **absenteeism**—where they are forced to take time off work for medical appointments, treatment or recovery, and even **presenteeism**—where employees show up for work but are unable to perform at their best due to health issues.

Between absenteeism and presenteeism, employees with gut health issues miss or are less productive for at least **11 work days** each month or a total of over 130 days each year and it's employers who bear the cost of a sick, absent workforce. In fact, people missing work due to GI issues is **six times more impactful** than the common cold. What's worse is that digestive conditions such as Ulcerative Colitis and **IBS** can lead to other expensive and alarming health issues, including chronic pain, cancer, migraines, kidney disease, and liver disease.

Employees are struggling to access effective care

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Employees often face significant challenges when attempting to access effective digestive care, due to a confluence of factors. One critical issue is the scarcity of health care professionals who specialize in GI diseases.

Gastroenterologists, the specialists primarily responsible for diagnosing and treating these conditions, are in **high demand and short supply** in many regions. This shortage translates to longer wait times for appointments, delayed diagnoses, and limited access to expert care.

Moreover, the efficacy of drugs used to treat digestive health issues can be a source of frustration for both patients and employers. While medications exist to manage various GI conditions, not all individuals respond well to these treatments, and the side effects can be debilitating. This inefficacy often leads to a trial-and-error approach, where patients must endure extended periods of discomfort, uncertainty, and lost productivity while searching for the right medication or treatment regimen. This is when they pursue treatment, many don't, due to **the stigma** surrounding these conditions, which can lead to serious complications.

Additionally, the health care landscape's increasing M&A activity further compounds the cost of GI care. As health care providers consolidate, they often negotiate higher prices for their services, which can be passed on to employers and their employees through elevated insurance premiums or out-of-pocket expenses. This financial burden can deter individuals from seeking the care they need and place additional strain on employers striving to provide comprehensive health care benefits to their workforce. In this environment, employers face the dual challenge of improving access to specialized GI care while mitigating the escalating costs associated with these treatments.

How employers can support employees living with GI illnesses

By developing strategies that enhance awareness, access to care, and the overall work environment, employers can foster a healthier, more inclusive, and productive workplace for employees managing GI issues.

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Employers must provide flexible work options to accommodate GI patients' medical appointments and treatments. By giving employees the option to work virtually, work half-days or any other number of **flexible work arrangements**, employers can help their employees with GI conditions reduce the need for extended absences.

There are also several high quality, evidence-based GI-specific benefits on the market today, which can help employees manage their symptoms and access specialized care. Of course, education is a cornerstone of care: employers can also organize workshops and seminars that educate employees about the importance of GI health, or even offer nutritious food options in office cafeterias and vending machines.

Employee wellbeing is a cornerstone of any successful and thriving business. By recognizing the impact of GI health on the workplace and implementing strategies to support it, employers can create a more productive, engaged, and healthier workforce while also improving their bottom line.

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