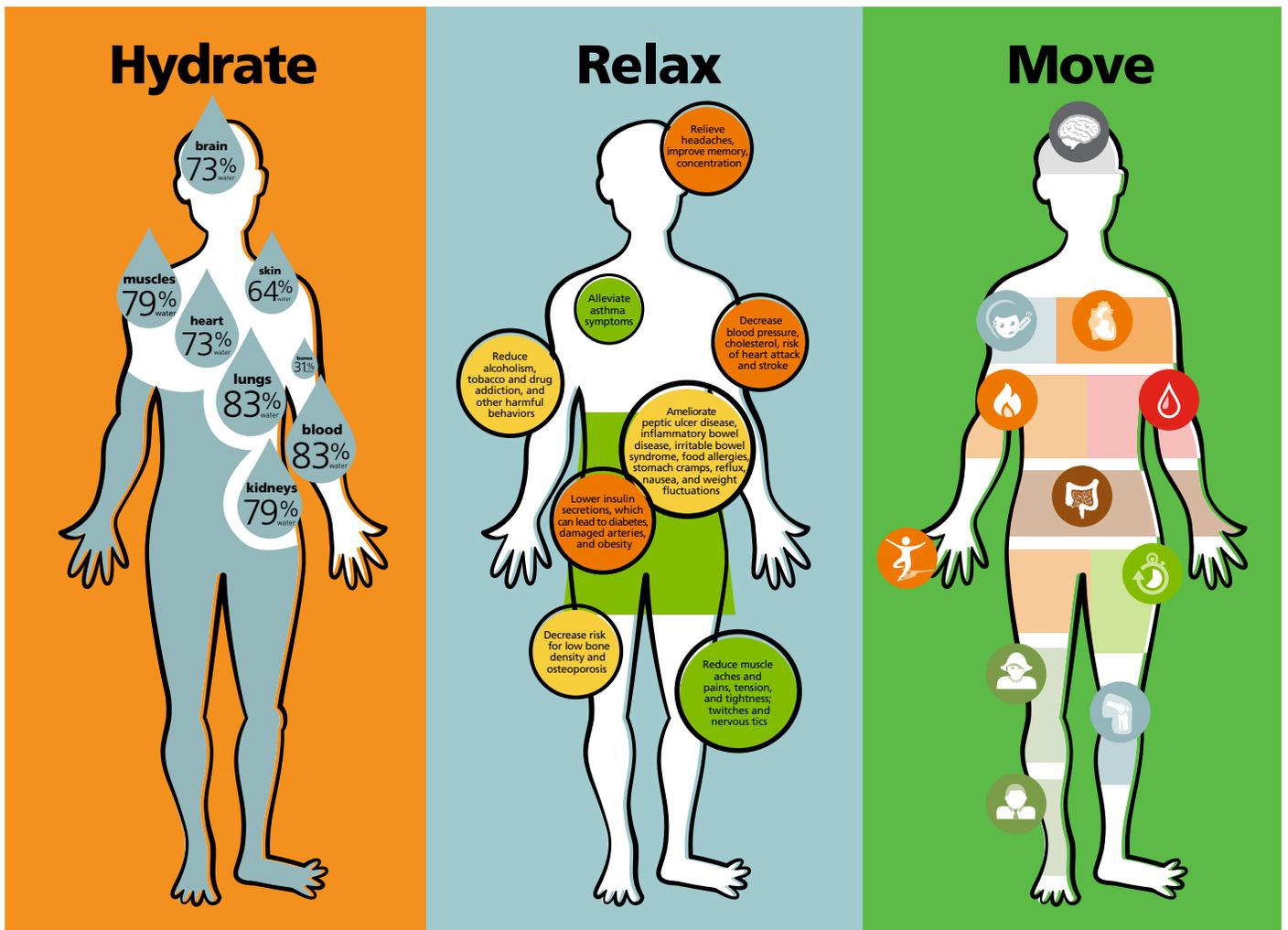


# The connection between safety and wellness

Research shows that a worker with healthy diet and exercise habits will be safer in the workplace



INFOGRAPHIC COURTESY OF SAIF

## By Deb Fell-Carlson

Health improvement as an injury prevention strategy may be new to some. However, injury-prevention experts agree that the only way to achieve and sustain a zero-injury work environment is to embrace health improvement as an injury prevention strategy.

Safety professionals have access to resources and tools to help employers do just that. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)

calls this broad, integrated approach to safety the Total Worker Health™ Initiative ([cdc.gov/niosh/twh/](http://cdc.gov/niosh/twh/)).

Studies show that a healthy, fit individual is more alert and able to respond more quickly to unexpected events. This means he or she is less likely to be injured. In addition, studies show that a healthy, fit person who does suffer an injury typically recovers more quickly. The foundation is preventing “presenteeism.”

We may be more familiar with the

term “absenteeism,” which is when we’re physically away from work. Presenteeism is when we’re physically on the job, but our mind is preoccupied.

Presenteeism renders an individual unable to fully focus on a task due to health-related issues. When the task is safety-sensitive, presenteeism can lead to disaster, whether at work or at home. SAIF’s approach is to assist employers with organizational strategies to address six presenteeism risk factors. ▶

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▲ SAFETY AND WELLNESS

Although the immediate goal is injury prevention, controlling these risk factors also contributes to long-range health improvement goals of traditional wellness programs. Workers are more alert, which may boost productivity, as well.

**Controlling the risks**

When planning training or providing health information to your employees, it is important to remember that every company is different. Consider the needs of your employees when providing information to help them meet their health goals.

One way to promote health improvement at the organizational level is by helping employees identify and control issues that work against alertness, productivity and safety. These can be simplified into three categories: what to do, what to avoid, and what to eat and drink.

**What to do: Move**

Inactivity can cause presenteeism, as well as contribute to obesity and other chronic conditions. Brisk activity for at least 30 minutes a day, on the other hand, improves alertness and cardiac fitness.

Besides cardiovascular endurance, functional fitness is important to injury prevention. This approach to fitness focuses on muscular strength and endurance, body composition, flexibility, mobility (the ability to move a limb through a full range of motion with control), muscle symmetry (stretching tight muscles and strengthening weak muscles), stability and coordination (motor control).

In the workplace: Remove barriers to movement; for example, identify nearby options for safe walking, bring aerobic fitness and exercise equipment on-site, or subsidize gym membership.

Encourage walking meetings and walking on breaks. Phase in sit-to-stand workstations for sedentary workers. Provide information to employees and families on the importance of movement and the hazards of sitting.

Educate employees on safe walking practices, such as wearing high-visibility reflective clothing, obeying traffic laws for pedestrians, and walking facing

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traffic, especially on rural roads without sidewalks. Consider investing in expert assistance to create an exercise program designed for your unique workforce needs.

**What to do: Sleep**

Fatigue contributes to inflammation, obesity and presenteeism. Being awake for 20 hours or more is likely to result in impaired judgment, reduced mental flexibility and response times that are similar to a person who is legally intoxicated. Most adults need seven to nine hours of sleep per night.

**In the workplace:** Explore strategic napping on lunch breaks. Assess and address lighting, noise and housekeeping. Provide sleep hygiene and lifestyle training for workers and supervisors.

Educate supervisors and employees on fatigue management strategies, such

**Cheap or free ideas that can improve worker health**

- Organize walking meetings.
- Compete as a work team in community events.
- Serve fruits and veggies for snacks.
- Volunteer to help a co-worker or someone in the community.
- Spend time outdoors enjoying nature.
- Provide incentives at work for employees who share with their families at home the safety and wellness they practice at work.
- Spend quality time with a child or family member.
- Compliment a co-worker for something specific.
- Stop using tobacco.
- Hold a sun safety campaign: Wear sunscreen or other protection.

as recognizing fatigue, scheduling and task variation. Look at fatigue factors in your workplace as hazards that can be controlled. Address shiftwork and over-time policies.

**What to eat: Healthy foods**

Refined, processed and sugary foods and beverages can cause inflammation, obesity and other chronic conditions. Sugary foods may also contribute to presenteeism.

**In the workplace:** Choose wholesome, healthy fruits and vegetables for vending machines, meetings and company events where food is served.

Facilitate employee access to healthy foods. For example, bring a farmers' market or community-supported agriculture program onsite. Provide information on healthy food choices to employees and families. ▶



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**What to drink: Water**

When we are dehydrated, brain function decreases, blood pressure and heart rate can rise, and we are prone to soft tissue injuries. Individual water needs vary, but a good indicator of proper hydration is light yellow or straw-colored urine.

**In the workplace:** Provide fresh, cool water at worksites and encourage consumption. Provide water instead of soft drinks at company functions. Educate employees on the importance of healthy hydration.

**What to avoid: Chronic stress**

Chronic stress contributes to presenteeism, obesity and inflammation.

**In the workplace:** Use your existing risk management process. Work with employees to identify stressors unique to your organization and to identify and implement controls to reduce the impact. Educate employees on stress self-manage-

**Cheap or free resources in your community**

- Local hospital
- Community education
- Diabetes education
- Physical therapy
- County health department
- Communicable disease education and immunizations
- Tobacco prevention coordinator
- Healthy Communities Coordinator
- Local gym
- YMCA or YWCA
- Local parks and recreation department
- Local community education offerings
- Local walking clubs
- Local pool
- Community fitness events

ment; make clinical resources available for crisis needs.

**What to avoid: Tobacco/nicotine**

Tobacco and nicotine use contribute to presenteeism by diminishing overall health. Tobacco use may also increase an employee's health risk to other airborne substances at work or at home.

**In the workplace:** Implement a tobacco-free workplace and provide employees with help to quit. The Oregon Health Authority ([www.oregon.gov/OHA](http://www.oregon.gov/OHA)) has excellent resources for employers and employees, including a fact sheet on e-cigarettes. ©

*Deb Fell-Carlson is the SAIF policyholder safety and wellness adviser. This article was used with permission from SAIF Corporation, Oregon's not-for-profit, state-chartered workers' compensation insurance company.*

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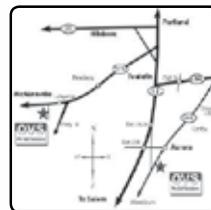
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