

Increasing Program Participation Rates In Health Promotion Programs

Successful Health Interventions Require Two Key Elements:

- A well-designed intervention that participants find effective in reaching their goals
- A high rate of participation for those needing the intervention.

No matter how well a program may be designed, if few people participate, the overall results are ineffective. Taking time to plan for increased participation is vital to any wellness program. Here are several basic concepts that can help increase participation rates in your program.

Build Interest

Allow several weeks to build up an interest in your wellness program. A series of announcements and educational communications released over several weeks leading up to the event helps build interest in participation. For example:

- Posters highlighting the coming event
- A letter or communication from the organization's president explaining why it is being planned and the value to the individual and the organization
- Brochures distributed to all employees giving details of the program
- Information in the organization's newsletter
- A check stuffer info sheet promoting the coming program
- Announcements sent to the employees' home address as well as to the office (spouses and significant others may encourage participation)
- An all-employee meeting at which you can present the program and benefits and answer questions:
 - Use a visual presentation (such as a slide show) showing the various steps involved
 - Demonstrate the different tests (e.g., a muscle strength test using a hand grip dynamometer or a percent body fat test)
 - Arrange for testimonies from participants who have already started the program
 - Pass out questionnaires and enroll people on the spot

Reduce Roadblocks

Form a small focus group of employees to determine if there are any roadblocks or concerns that might block participation and then address these issues. For example:

- Choose an assessment that is concise and quick and easy to complete
- Consider keeping questionnaire and screening session short so people can finish quickly and are not gone from work very long
- Schedule blood draws and health tests early in the morning so the fasting blood test doesn't require going too long without eating
- Make some tests optional if people don't want to complete them (such as the blood draw or a difficult fitness test)
- Schedule some testing sessions very early or in the evening for spouses who wish to participate
- Set a policy on confidentiality and communicate it well so participants feel secure that their data will not be reviewed by their boss or employer (only aggregate data should be seen by administration)

Make the Event Fun/Festive

Think creatively to make the event fun and something people will want to attend, like:

- Have balloons, posters, signs, and banners up
- Provide refreshments after test completion
- Have prizes or rewards for participating: water bottles, buttons, t-shirts, movie tickets, etc.
- Play music
- Have testing personnel dress up (special hats, special shirts, etc.)

Provide Incentives

Offer a special incentive for people to participate, such as:

- Money
- Prizes
- A deduction on their health insurance co-payment
- A lottery ticket for a chance to win a free bicycle, trip for 2 at a resort, golf passes, dinner for 2, etc.
- Give one or two larger items and/or several smaller prizes
- Discounts to a fitness center
- Offer rewards for meeting health goals in 6 months or a year (weight loss, BP reduction, cholesterol reduction)
- Offer financial help with health seminars, classes, fun runs, or support groups for participants

Help People See Perceived Value

The testing service is a valuable one. Make sure they know what a valuable service they are receiving and that it is a special privilege to participate.

- Provide a printed ticket showing their appointment time and the value of the screening, such as “Value \$75, price covered by your employer.”
- Limit participation to a group of employees if you have limited resources or testing personnel, i.e., offer it to the first 300 people who sign up (or about 15% of the population).
- Then offer the program a couple months later to an additional group of employees.

Offer Multiple Testing Sessions

Some will resist any new program offered to employees. Others wait and see how others fare before they try it. Many companies have nearly doubled their participation rates by offering the program again a month or so after the initial launch. Here are the statistics for most new programs¹:

- **Innovators** (2.5% of the population)
 - The people who are anxious to see new innovations and programs and encourage such. They may form an early testing group before all employees are invited to participate. They can tell others how it went and what they learned.
- **Early Adoptors** (13.5% of the population)
 - Those who sign up with little encouragement. Others will watch this group to see how they fare and learn whether they enjoyed it or not.
- **Early Majority** (34% of the population)
 - With more promotion and encouragement, this third will be the next group to sign up. They have watched the early adoptors and often respond best to a personal invitation.

¹ Source: “Disseminating Innovations in Health Care,” JAMA, April 16, 2003.

- **Late Majority** (34% of the population)
 - Represents those who wait to see how the Early Majority group fared. They don't want to make a change until they see that the new status quo is to get involved in the new program. Offering another testing session several weeks after the main testing program will pick up many of these people. This group may need special attention or personal invitations by phone or in person to sign up. They need to be reassured.
- **The Laggards** (the remaining 16% of the population)
 - Often the resisters or procrastinators. They are the most conservative and reluctant to try something new. They often require several personal invitations, including a phone call or face-to-face invitation. They may not participate until a year or two down the road. Having an integrated policy that ties their health insurance co-premium with their participation (or other major incentive) is a big motivator with this group.

For those who don't sign-up at first, send them a special invitation on their birthday. Another idea is to include your health assessment as part of all new employee orientations. Simply incorporate it into your orientation program, expecting everyone to participate. Be sure to explain confidentiality protection and the personal benefits of participating.

Create the Expectation That Everyone Will Participate

- When passing out the lifestyle questionnaires in a group meeting (after explaining the program), simply give everyone the questionnaire and their appointment time. Let them know if they can't keep that appointment you can change it for them.
- At birthday times (if you use this method) simply send people their appointment. Tell them it is time for their annual wellness assessment and to come at the specified time. If they need to change their appointment, ask them to call.
- Don't ask people if they want to participate, just ask them which screening session they want to attend.

Integrate Participation with Benefits

- Make some benefits contingent upon participation in the wellness program.
- Set health insurance co-payments based on their participation. Make the difference if they don't participate \$500 to \$1,000 per year. This usually gets about everyone. The rationale goes like this: If you are not participating in keeping up your health, your expenses will be greater and you thus need to pay more for your insurance.
- If they participate in the wellness screening and year-long program, make them eligible for other benefits or a chance to win a major reward, such as a trip for two to an exotic location.
- Invite spouses to participate as well. Spouses and significant others may encourage your employee to join.

Lead by Example

Finally—and perhaps most importantly—is to have administration set the tone that your wellness program is important and that everyone is expected to participate. This is especially true in a health care organization to show the public that your organization believes in good health, is innovative, and leads by example!

- This message should be sent in a letter to all employees stating that the wellness program is very important and that they are counting on everyone participating. Make the point that administrators are actively participating as well.
- Show departmental heads and administrators participating in the health testing. A picture is a powerful statement. Others will see that you believe it is valuable and that everyone is expected to participate.
- Plan a special opportunity for your organization's board to participate in your health assessment program and experience what you are trying to promote. Get their backing, input, and support.