

# THE DENVER POST

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## Employers give workers incentive to diet, walk off weight

By Jeannie Piper  
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When 34-year-old Tina Garcia decided to lose weight this year, her employer stepped up to help. It provides her with a diet and exercise plan and pays her as she succeeds.

"I got into it to get healthy, but the money is a nice incentive," said Garcia, an administrative assistant at Kaiser Permanente. The \$6 a month is "enough for me to buy lunch."

If all goes as predicted, the benefits will flow both ways as she and more than 200 of her coworkers make a difference in the company's health care costs.

"We think our program will save about \$500 in the first year for any employees who lose 10 percent of their body weight and are able to sustain it," said Jack Rule. He's the chief executive of incentaHEALTH, the Denver based health-care technology company that administers Kaiser's incentive program.

Rule bases his estimate on a two-year study of General Motors employees, which found that each overweight worker cost the company up to \$1,500 a year in doctors' visits and prescription drugs. Missed workdays, which lead to additional employer expenses, were not included in that figure.

Rule and his partner, Todd McGuire, offer Kaiser employees a program that combines nutritional education with a simple exercise plan delivered in daily e-mails. Participants follow the plan and track their progress in the office.

Individual data is collected with a fingerprint scanner, a digital scale and a camera. Workers can weigh in as often as they like and view their own photos online, but only the quarterly weigh-ins are counted toward their weight loss goal.

Depending on their starting body mass index (BMI), a weight-to-height ratio, employees can earn between \$5 and \$50 a month as they lose weight. IncentaHEALTH charges Kaiser \$9 a month for each worker who participates.



"We tried to price this to the employer so they'd save \$2 for every \$1 the program costs them," Rule said. Kaiser is incentaHEALTH's first client.

During the first quarter, the 229 participants shed a total of 1,135 pounds. More than 78 percent of them lost weight and lowered their BMI, Rule said.

Kaiser, Colorado's largest private health care provider, also helps 15 local companies reduce their employees' obesity rates. It offers lectures and exercise programs to companies with more than 100 Kaiser members, such as the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, TIAA-CREF and the Colorado Department of Transportation.

"We're seeing that folks want these types of programs," said Michelle Esquibel, CDOT wellness administrator. "We (also) have surveys that demonstrate we're saving dollars.

"We're making a difference in their energy here at work. They're eating more fruits and vegetables, consuming more water."

With bottled water in hand, between 10 and 20 CDOT workers take a brisk outdoor walk twice a week during their lunch hour.

This year, thanks to a \$500 mini-grant from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, prevention specialist Melissa Welch was hired to maximize the six-week spring session.

"They're getting out, getting away from work, and it helps manage stress at the office," Welch said.

She arrives on Tuesdays, pumping up the walkers with nutritional advice and leading them in strength and stretching exercises before they take to the streets.

CDOT civil drafter Louis Avgeris, 42, said the walks wake him up and keep him from being lazy.

"I need the exercise. I sit at my work station all day, and this is a chance to get up and get my heart going," he said.

Avgeris also said walking makes him feel more motivated and more alert.

Esquibel works with a \$20,000 budget, which includes health fairs, wellness workshops and incentive and fitness programs for CDOT's six regions - Aurora, Pueblo, Greeley, Grand Junction, Durango and Denver. More than 800 of its 3,200 employees take part in the wellness programs.

Like Rule, Esquibel believes that investing in employee wellness brings big returns, in higher employee productivity, better morale and lower obesity rates.

And while walking is good, Rule said he recommends a more comprehensive program for obesity reduction.

"To really make any inroads into this problem for a long-term result," he said, "you need to change your nutritional habits as well as doing cardio and strength."

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