

Life's brighter under the sun



# DIABETES: AN ACTION PLAN FOR EMPLOYERS

COST-EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES TO HELP PREVENT DIABETES IN THE WORKPLACE

# Foreword

My career – as a patient caregiver and employee health leader – has been devoted to helping Canadians live healthy lives. In my professional practice at Rogers, diabetes prevention and management has been a key area of focus - and a top priority for the organization. As a result, I've seen firsthand the growth in the disease and its leading risk factors.

The World Health Organization (WHO) classifies diabetes as a global epidemic, with 400 million people anticipated to develop the disease by 2030. The Canadian Diabetes Association estimates that over 1/3 of the population will have type 2 diabetes or be pre-diabetic by 2020 – with the economic cost of the disease expected to reach \$16.9 billion. And it's not just individual patients and our national health care system that are affected. It is also having a great impact on employers through lost productivity, absenteeism, drug and disability claims.

Change is possible – because there are prevention steps people can take to greatly reduce the risk of diabetes. The Harvard School of Public Health states that about 9 in 10 cases of type 2 diabetes can be avoided by living a healthy lifestyle.

As an employer, you already play a huge role in the lives of your employees. That presents a tremendous opportunity to promote the awareness of risk factors – and support employees in leading healthier lifestyles that can prevent or delay the development of the disease. I encourage you to read on – and learn more about the ways in which you can help counter the impact of diabetes on your employees and your organization.



## Dr. David Satok

Medical Director, Rogers Communications

*In addition to his role as Corporate Medical Director of Rogers Communications, which he has held since April 2008, Dr. Satok is also Lecturer at the University of Toronto Department of Family and Community Medicine, where he teaches medical students in his office. He is currently Physician Recruiter for the University's undergraduate program.*

*Dr. Satok previously held the position of Chief Medical Officer in the Bioclinical division of Apotex Research Incorporated, where he worked for sixteen years. Today, he continues working in the area of Family Medicine, seeing patients on a daily basis.*

## THE CONVERSATION.

At Sun Life, we know that it takes many voices to have a great conversation. That's why we are working with a wide range of people – inside and outside of Sun Life – to bring the best thinking in Group Benefits to the marketplace. These are subject experts, visionaries and leaders in best practices and innovative ideas – coming together to take benefits to the next level. We will be using our resources, expertise and relationships to facilitate the dialogue. We understand the power of great minds. We want everyone to contribute.

Join **THE CONVERSATION.** Brought to you by Sun Life Financial.

## Diabetes can have devastating effects on health

Diabetes can cause serious, sometimes life-threatening, health complications.



### Heart disease

People with diabetes are **two to four times more likely** to develop heart disease and stroke.



### Eye disease

Diabetes is the **most common cause of blindness in people younger than 65 years** of age.



### Kidney disease

**1/3 of people who have had diabetes for 15 years or longer** will develop kidney failure.



### Depression

**30% of people with diabetes suffer symptoms of depression**, 10% experience major depression.



### Nerve Damage

**7 out of 10 non-traumatic limb amputations are caused by diabetes** related nerve damage.

## The World Health Organization classifies diabetes as a global epidemic

**Diabetes is a chronic and sometimes fatal disease** in which the body cannot control the amount of sugar in the blood. It can damage organs, blood vessels and nerves.

### Pre-diabetes

Refers to blood glucose levels that are higher than normal, but not yet high enough to be diagnosed as type 2 diabetes. Half of those with pre-diabetes go on to develop type 2 diabetes.

### Type 2

Diabetes is when the body can't properly make or use insulin – the hormone that controls sugar (glucose) in the blood. 90% of diabetes cases are type 2, with onset more often in adulthood. Many cases are significantly influenced by lifestyle factors.

### Type 1

Diabetes occurs when the body can't produce insulin at all. It occurs in 5-10% of cases and generally develops in childhood. It is unrelated to lifestyle, but is instead a function of genes and environment.

# The issue: A dramatic increase in the prevalence and cost of diabetes in Canada

More and more Canadians are affected by diabetes each year, and the costs continue to rise. The number of Canadians diagnosed with type 2 diabetes doubled between 2000 and 2010 – and by 2020, almost 10% of the population will have the disease. When you factor in pre-diabetes cases, the numbers leap threefold – one third of all Canadians will either have type 2 diabetes or pre-diabetes by 2020. More than 20 people are diagnosed with the disease every hour of every day.<sup>1</sup>

The cost of diabetes is also increasing at an alarming rate. In 2010, the cost was \$12.2 billion – double what it was in 2000. By 2020, the cost of the disease is expected to reach \$16.9 billion.<sup>2</sup>

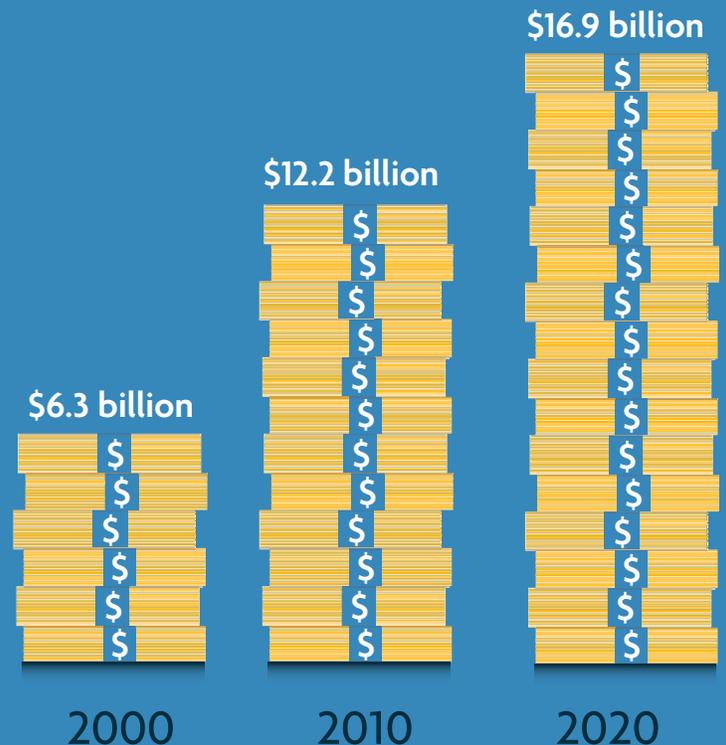
## WHAT'S CAUSING THE INCREASE?

According to the Canadian Diabetes Association (CDA), this alarming increase in diabetes is due to several factors, including rising obesity rates, increasingly sedentary lifestyles and an aging population. In addition, almost 80% of new Canadians are from populations at higher risk for diabetes (Aboriginal, Hispanic, Asian, South Asian, African descent), and Aboriginal peoples in Canada are three to five times more likely to develop the disease.

*People with diabetes incur medical costs up to three times higher than other Canadians.<sup>3</sup>*



## The cost of diabetes in Canada



Source: Canadian Diabetes Association,  
An economic tsunami: the cost of diabetes in Canada

**A CRISIS IN AWARENESS**

Despite the seriousness of the diabetes epidemic and its effects, there is a distinct lack of awareness of the risk factors and complications of the disease among the Canadian public and employers.

In the *2013 Sun Life Canadian Health Index* national survey of Canadian attitudes on health, 40% of adults surveyed were unable to correctly identify even one of five major risk factors for diabetes, and only 20% could correctly identify at least four of five risk factors. It's not surprising then that approximately 20% of all cases of diabetes in Canada go undiagnosed.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, the *2013 Sun Life-Buffett National Wellness Survey*, a national survey of Canadian employers on workplace wellness and health promotion, found that while a sedentary lifestyle and obesity topped the list of health risks employers were concerned about, diabetes was listed as a concern by only 8% of organizations surveyed.

*In addition to the costs to individuals and healthcare systems, diabetes presents a significant economic burden to employers.*

A person with diabetes can face **direct costs for medication and diabetes supplies from \$1,000 to \$15,000 per year** – costs generally covered by employer healthcare plans.<sup>5</sup>



**Over half** of all **new cases** of diabetes arise in **people of working age**.<sup>6</sup>



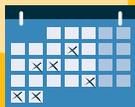
The complications of diabetes include many of the **top conditions that drive workplace disability claims**, including heart disease and depression.<sup>7</sup>



Diabetes medication ranks **second in drug spending** by employer-sponsored plans.<sup>8</sup>



Studies found that employees with diabetes are **absent 2 to 10 days more per year** than those without diabetes.<sup>9</sup>



Employees with diabetes were found to be **three times more likely to have to stop working due to illness** than those without diabetes.<sup>10</sup>



*The burden of diabetes in the workplace*



## *A simple formula...*

*Exercise and healthy eating can beat and control type 2 diabetes.*



A recent study showed that people at risk of type 2 diabetes reduced their risk of developing the disease by **58%** by **exercising moderately for 30 minutes a day** and **losing 5 to 7% of their body weight.**<sup>11</sup>

# The facts: Diabetes can be prevented – and controlled

*Employers are ideally positioned to help reduce the risk of diabetes in the workplace – and the stakes have never been higher*

**The Harvard School of Public Health states that about 9 in 10 cases of diabetes could be avoided by healthier living: keeping weight under control, exercising, eating a healthy diet, and not smoking.** People who are pre-disposed to develop diabetes should be made aware of their risk and take extra caution not to develop additional risk factors.

For those with type 2 diabetes, controlling the condition will help prevent the development of serious, possibly life-threatening complications. They should take medication (if required), monitor glucose levels, reduce stress, eat healthily and get enough physical activity.

While lifestyle changes clearly can have a significant impact on preventing or delaying the onset of diabetes, it is easier said than done. While 81% of Canadians surveyed for the 2010 Sun Life Canadian Health Index believe individuals control their own health, 61% of respondents don't have the willpower to change their health habits, and 46% say they don't have the time.

Employers have a great opportunity to help employees overcome the barriers to healthier living and reduce their risk of developing diabetes. By making wellness information, resources and programs convenient and accessible to employees during or after work, you can create an important support network, build motivation and foster a healthy workplace culture.



## Diabetes risk factors

- **Being overweight**  
approximately 60% of Canadians are overweight
- **Inactivity**  
50% of Canadians over age 12 are inactive
- **High blood pressure**
- **Elevated cholesterol**
- **Smoking**
- **Aging**  
risk increases for those over age 40
- **Family history**
- **Race/cultural background** at risk populations include Aboriginal, Hispanic, South Asian, Asian and African
- **Birthing a baby over 9 pounds** or having been diagnosed with **gestational diabetes**
- **Having been diagnosed with polycystic ovary syndrome**

Source: Canadian Diabetes Association, Cardiac Care Network

## Depression and diabetes

While the demands of managing diabetes may contribute to depression, it can work both ways. Depression can lead to poor lifestyle decisions, such as unhealthy eating, less exercise, smoking and weight gain — all of which are risk factors for diabetes.

Source: Mayo Clinic





## *Get started: A four-step approach to tackling diabetes in the workplace*

Taking action on diabetes in the workplace doesn't have to be an expensive proposition, but it should be strategic to ensure that your money and resources are properly directed.

The following four-step approach provides a strategic, yet practical, framework that will help you effectively tackle diabetes in your organization:

- 1 Organizational assessment
- 2 General awareness
- 3 Personal awareness
- 4 Health promotion

When implementing each step, secure leadership support and find internal champions who can amplify your message and 'walk the talk'. This is an important part of raising diabetes awareness and promoting preventative behaviours.

### **1** ASSESS THE HEALTH RISKS PRESENT WITHIN YOUR ORGANIZATION

To understand whether diabetes is a priority area for your workplace wellness efforts, start by assessing the health risks facing your employees. Assessment allows you to gather critical data and insights and make informed decisions on where to prioritize your resources. Depending on your organization, assessment tools could include:

- **Health risk assessment (HRA):** Often available through your benefits carrier or Employee Assistance Program (EAP), this questionnaire assesses health in multiple areas, including physical activity, nutrition, weight and family history. Work with your benefits provider to collect aggregate results that will indicate the greatest areas of risk.

### GET A STRATEGIC DOSE OF WELLNESS

Sun Life's Bright Paper, "A Strategic Dose of Wellness," outlines the strategic components of effective workplace wellness programs – profiling five organizations that have successfully taken a strategic approach to wellness.

Download the full PDF of the Bright Paper by visiting [sunlife.ca/strategicdoseofwellness](http://sunlife.ca/strategicdoseofwellness)

# Make the most of available resources



## • Your providers:

Your benefits or employee assistance program (EAP) provider likely has diabetes awareness resources and programs that you can leverage.

## • Associations and government:

The CDA website: [www.diabetes.ca](http://www.diabetes.ca) is a great resource to promote, and it's free. The federal government website: [www.healthycanadians.gc.ca](http://www.healthycanadians.gc.ca) also has a lot of useful information.

## • Company intranet:

Include diabetes messages and information on your intranet. If you don't have an intranet, or want to develop yours further, you can work with your insurance carrier to create a health and wellness website. This can operate as a standalone site or be linked to from your intranet.

- **Wellness Interest Survey:** Online or paper-based, this survey gathers employee feedback about interest in health-related topics, program preferences and likelihood to participate. A valuable tool to inform your program development.
- **Integrated Data Analysis (IDA):** A thorough review of your organization's aggregated drug and disability claims data as well as aggregate employee use of benefits such as an EAP. An IDA is more of a commitment in time and money, but can give you a precise view of employee health risks that affect your benefits costs – and where your wellness investment can have the greatest impact.

## 2 PROMOTE GENERAL AWARENESS OF DIABETES RISKS ACROSS YOUR ORGANIZATION

Diabetes awareness is low among the general public – many people don't know diabetes incidence is a growing problem, and that they could be at risk.<sup>12</sup> As an employer, you can help educate employees about diabetes causes, risk factors, effects and prevention.

What you can do to raise general employee awareness:

- Use the communication channels in your organization, such as an employee newsletter or intranet, to get the facts out to employees about diabetes. Include links to the Canadian Diabetes Association and their suite of educational material.
- Leverage national initiatives such as Diabetes Awareness Month (November) and the Walk to Cure Diabetes to push communications – and to create opportunities for team participation.
- Incorporate diabetes messaging in existing health resources, such as those offered by your EAP or benefits provider.

3

## PROMOTE PERSONAL AWARENESS OF DIABETES RISKS AMONG EMPLOYEES

Once you've raised general awareness about diabetes, the next step is helping employees understand their own personal risk of developing the disease, so they know if they need to take action. For those living with the condition, personal awareness means paying close attention to their health status, having close interaction with their healthcare team, and constantly learning about making healthier choices.

## Maximize the potential of workplace diabetes screening

The 2013 Sun Life Canadian Health Index **found that the majority of respondents (62%) would be willing to participate** in free online or in-person diabetes screening clinics.

Yet, the 2013 Sun Life-Buffett National Wellness Survey found that only **2% of Canadian employers reported offering diabetes screening** to their employees.

**START WITH SCREENING:** You can introduce a diabetes screening program at work as a key tool for raising personal awareness. While employees would not be diagnosed with diabetes in a workplace setting, they can gain awareness of their personal risk factors, which can prompt them to visit their doctor. Clinics are an effective method of gathering aggregate information about employee health, which can serve as an important benchmark for future wellness program decisions. Here are some choices to consider:

**Offer workplace screening clinics that include diabetes screening:** In these clinics, a registered nurse takes biometric measures, including: blood pressure, casual glucose, total cholesterol, body mass index (BMI), body fat percentage and waist circumference.

According to the CDA, waist circumference measurements and BMI in particular are both valid indicators of risk for type 2 diabetes. To provide additional screening for diabetes, look for a clinic that includes the CANRISK questionnaire – The Canadian Diabetes Risk Questionnaire.

While offering a clinic may seem daunting, it doesn't have to be – look for a benefits provider who offers expert planning, guidance and support to implement the clinics in your workplace.

*Diabetes screening is well worth the investment to give at-risk employees an important wake-up call*

**Promote the CANRISK questionnaire:** While it is best to have a health care practitioner go through the questionnaire with employees in order to answer questions and provide coaching based on results, you simply may not have the resources to do so. If this is the case, you can still encourage employees to complete the CANRISK questionnaire on their own – it can be completed online on the Public Health Agency of Canada's website. This won't provide you with any aggregate data, but it will help to bring awareness to those who may be at risk – and it doesn't cost anything.

**4 HEALTH PROMOTION**

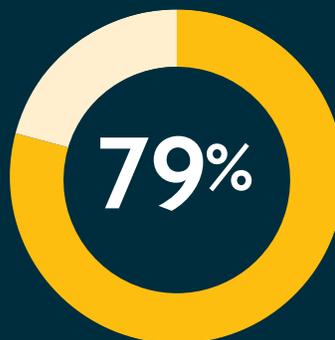
The fourth step in workplace diabetes prevention is promoting healthy eating, physical activity and emotional well-being with targeted initiatives. When making program decisions, leverage the insights from your assessments to deliver on the actual health needs and interests of your employees.

The following recommendations will help you focus your efforts and target the specific risk factors related to diabetes. Ranging from simple to comprehensive, these tips will help you take action today and plan for tomorrow:

Case Study

# Diabetes Screening at Work

A 2013 Sun Life diabetes screening clinic pilot with Rogers Communications produced some remarkable results:<sup>13</sup>



of participants said they plan to make changes to their lifestyle as a result of the screening



said they would not have known their prevention measures without attending the clinic

## Health risks uncovered at Sun Life screening clinics:

In 2013, out of **11,000 people** who participated in screening clinics run by Sun Life for our clients:



Business Findings



**LEVERAGE EXISTING PROGRAMS – YOU CAN DO A LOT WITH A LITTLE:** Sometimes employees don't know about the health resources and programs you already offer, such as an EAP, gym memberships and resources from your benefits provider. Speak with your providers to make sure you are taking full advantage of any resources included in their service.

**Marketing is key.** Take some time to package resources and/or initiatives together and present them as a cohesive diabetes awareness program. This is an effective – and inexpensive – way to attract attention and engage employees. Use your existing communications channels to promote the program.

**DEVELOP A WELLNESS CHAMPION NETWORK:** To help promote your programs, engage passionate individuals who can ignite interest and gather grassroots feedback about wellness programs and preferences. Your network can distribute information and promote key initiatives such as a CANRISK questionnaire campaign.

**OFFER HEALTH CHALLENGES:** These are a great way to prompt employees to adopt a healthier lifestyle – and support those who are already ready and eager. When addressing diabetes, consider a “whole health” challenge that focuses on nutrition and physical activity. Employees can participate individually or as a team and receive points for their achievements. A strong communications plan will help boost participation, as will incentives to reward employees for changing their health-related habits (consider healthy incentives like gift cards to sporting goods stores, cookbooks, water bottles). Health challenges can offer the added bonuses of increasing employee engagement in the organization and building team spirit.

**EDUCATE EMPLOYEES ABOUT HEALTHY EATING AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY:** Offer education sessions online or bring a diabetes educator to your workplace (ask your wellness provider or the CDA). Consider bringing in a nutritionist for healthy cooking demonstrations as a fun way to promote healthy eating. Introduce the principles of exercise and the ways that employees can incorporate physical activity into their day.

Set an example – introduce healthy food options in meetings, vending machines and cafeterias and place posters around those areas with key nutrition facts.

**PROMOTE GOOD MENTAL HEALTH:** Given the link between diabetes and depression, and the negative consequences of stress on the body, promoting a mentally healthy workplace should be incorporated into your diabetes prevention plan. You can include mental health elements into your health challenge or education sessions and also provide employees with resources to help them learn how to manage stress and build resiliency. Training for managers that enables them to spot mental health issues in employees and direct them to the appropriate workplace resources, such as an EAP, can be a key part of a workplace mental health program. Consult Sun Life's Bright Paper, “Mental health in the workplace – a little training goes a long way”, available at [sunlife.ca/mentalhealth](http://sunlife.ca/mentalhealth) to learn more about how mental health training for managers can benefit your organization.

**PROVIDE EXPERT ADVICE:** Offer an “ask the expert” experience to your employees through your wellness website or intranet, or even an anonymous drop box. Direct the questions to an expert (ask your benefits provider or the CDA for a referral) and post responses on your website or newsletter. You could also do this with a nutrition or fitness expert.

## Measurement is key

As with any health initiative, **measurement must be an important part** of your action plan for diabetes. Work with your provider to **define program objectives** and then **measure outcomes** that will demonstrate impact and uncover opportunities for continuous improvement.

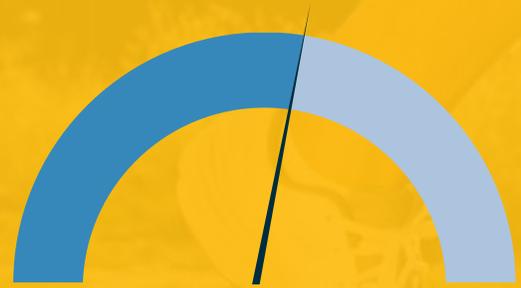
Track participation and wherever possible use pre- and post-event surveys to **ask employees about how the initiatives have helped them improve their health.**

## *Health challenge in action*

York Region is a recognized leader in promoting and enabling employee wellness with a comprehensive and strategic approach. In 2014, York Region ran a four-week health challenge to promote physical activity, healthy eating habits and stress reduction. Through posters displayed in high-traffic areas, messages from leadership and email invitations, they directed employees to their wellness website to learn more about the challenge and sign up.



**400+** employees participated in the health challenge, exceeding expectations



**55%** of participants were over the age of 40, a **risk factor** in developing diabetes and heart disease

Participating in teams or individually, employees earned points by doing at least 20 minutes of physical activity a day, eating the recommended servings of fruits and/or vegetables and engaging in a relaxation inducing activity like meditation or deep breathing.

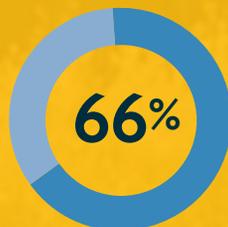
There were weekly draws for a health-related prize as well as prizes for those who had earned the most points by the end of the challenge. Success stories were shared online to foster team spirit and motivate others. The results were impressive:



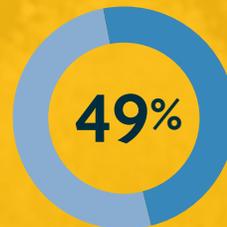
would participate in the challenge again



achieved the healthy living goals they set for the challenge



increased their physical activity level



improved their nutrition



were able to manage stress better

\*Results based on participant survey responses

# *Create a diabetes action plan for your workplace*

With so much at stake, and so many tools available, taking steps now to raise awareness and prevent diabetes can help you avoid the rising costs of the disease to your organization, while also improving the lives of your employees.

No two organizations are alike, and your needs in helping employees live healthier lifestyles to prevent or control this disease – and the resources available to do this – will differ from others. Talk to your benefits provider about putting a diabetes action plan in place that is right for your organization.

<sup>1</sup>Canadian Diabetes Association

<sup>2</sup>ibid

<sup>3</sup>ibid

<sup>4</sup>Public Health Agency of Canada, Diabetes 2011 Facts and Figures

<sup>5</sup>Canadian Diabetes Association

<sup>6</sup>Public Health Agency of Canada, Diabetes 2011 Facts and Figures

<sup>7</sup>Towers Watson 2011/2012 Staying@Work Survey

<sup>8</sup>TELUS Block of Business data, 2013

<sup>9</sup>Diabetes Care, "Burden of Diabetes on the Ability to Work: A Systematic Review," Vol. 36, March 2013, 740-749

<sup>10</sup>ibid

<sup>11</sup>Canadian Diabetes Association

<sup>12</sup>Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, Diabetes: Strategies for Prevention, Report of the Chief Medical Officer of Health

<sup>13</sup>279 people attended the clinic as part of the pilot

# *Notes*

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