

# Benefits Insights

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## The Benefits of Investing in Employee Digestive Wellness

In the pursuit of a productive and thriving workforce, employers often focus on traditional wellness programs targeting physical fitness and mental health. However, one area that is often overlooked but equally vital is digestive health. A healthy digestive system contributes to physical well-being and impacts mental resilience and productivity.

This article provides an overview of digestive health benefits, their importance and considerations for employers.

### What Are Digestive Health Benefits?

The National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases reports that up to 70 million Americans are affected by gastrointestinal (GI) diseases, including diarrhea and constipation, annually. Other common GI conditions include:

- Diverticulitis
- Crohn's disease
- Ulcerative colitis (UC)
- Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)
- Small intestinal bacterial overgrowth (SIBO)
- Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD)
- Ulcers, such as stomach and esophageal

Digestive health benefits encompass initiatives and resources to support and promote healthy digestive systems in employees. These include access to nutritious foods, educational programs on digestive wellness, stress management support and resources for addressing digestive disorders. By focusing on these benefits, employers can optimize the digestive function of their workforce, thereby enhancing overall health and productivity.

### Why Are These Benefits Important?

Many GI diseases can be prevented or minimized by maintaining a healthy lifestyle and getting screened for cancer. If left untreated, these conditions can seriously impact an employee's personal life and have a ripple effect on their work productivity.

Furthermore, employees experiencing gut health issues contribute to absenteeism and presenteeism; the World Health Organization reports they either miss work or are less productive for at least 11 workdays per month—or a total of more than 130 days each year. The burden of a sick or absent workforce falls on employers as they bear the associated costs. According to health care contractor Accorded, GI patients cost employers three to eight times more than a healthy adult. Furthermore, GI issues are the fourth largest driver of employee-related health care costs.

In addition to preventing or reducing the financial impact of GI conditions, digestive health benefits are also important for employees for the following reasons:

- **Physical well-being**—A well-functioning digestive system ensures proper nutrient absorption, which is essential for overall physical health. Employees with optimal digestive health are less likely to experience issues such as bloating, gas or indigestion, which can impact their daily lives and work performance.



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- **Mental well-being**—Research increasingly confirms the connection between gut health and mental wellness. The gut microbiome plays a significant role in producing neurotransmitters like serotonin, which affects mood regulation. Therefore, supporting digestive health can reduce stress, anxiety and depression among employees.
- **Employee productivity and performance**—Much of the body's immune system resides in the gut. A healthy digestive system supports a robust immune response, reducing the risk of illnesses and infections. Poor digestion can lead to discomfort and decreased focus, ultimately affecting work performance. Employees with strong immune systems are less likely to take sick leave, resulting in improved energy levels and productivity and lower absenteeism and presenteeism rates for employers.
- **Long-term health**—If left unaddressed, chronic digestive issues can lead to more serious health problems over time, such as inflammatory bowel diseases, nutrient deficiencies or cancers.
- **Promote flexible work arrangements.** Flexible work options can accommodate GI patients' symptoms, appointments and treatments. Such flexibility can also help reduce employee stress and satisfaction.
- **Organize educational opportunities.** As with any workplace initiative, education is key. Employers can offer workshops, seminars and other informational resources to educate employees about the importance of digestive health and provide practical tips for maintaining a healthy gut.
- **Reduce the stigma.** The stigma or anxiety associated with digestive issues may cause employees not to seek treatment. Employers can normalize gut health conversations in the workplace, offer accommodations while experiencing flares and encourage employees to get the care they need to stay healthy.
- **Promote healthy eating habits.** Many employees lack the time and motivation to think about eating well in addition to the demands of work and daily life. Employers can help increase access to nutritious foods and beverages in the workplace and consider subsidizing healthy meal options to encourage healthier eating habits among employees.

By providing support for digestive health, employers can contribute to their employees' holistic and long-term health, reducing health care costs and promoting a healthier workforce overall.

### Employer Considerations

Prioritizing initiatives that support digestive wellness may allow employers to demonstrate care for their employees' holistic health and reap the benefits of a happier, healthier and more engaged workforce. Consider the following strategies to support digestive health:

- **Improve access to digestive care.** Gastroenterologists, specialists who diagnose and treat GI conditions, are in high demand and in short supply in many regions. This shortage causes longer appointment wait times, delayed diagnoses and limited access to expert care. Employers can help offer employees access to necessary medical professionals, nutritionists and wellness coaches for personalized guidance and support on their health care journeys. Digestive health support can also be incorporated into employee assistance programs.

### Summary

Digestive health benefits are an investment in not just the physical well-being of employees but also their mental resilience and overall productivity. By prioritizing initiatives that support digestive wellness, employers demonstrate their commitment to fostering a healthy and thriving workforce.

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