

Food at work: workplace solutions for malnutrition, obesity and chronic diseases

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In my presentation, "Food at Work," I describe positive examples of how governments, employers and trade unions are improving the nutritional status of workers and subsequently improving productivity. My focus is global but with an emphasis on health concerns in Colombia and Latin America.

Too often the workplace meal program is either an afterthought or not even considered by employers. Work, instead of being accommodating, is frequently a hindrance to proper nutrition. Canteens, if they exist, routinely offer an unhealthy and unvaried selection. Vending machines are regularly stocked with unhealthy snacks. Local restaurants can be expensive or in short supply. Street foods can be bacteria laden. Workers sometimes have no time to eat, no place to eat or no money to purchase food. Some workers are unable to consume enough calories to perform the strenuous work expected of them.

No work sector is free from such hindrances. Agricultural and construction workers often eat in dangerous and unsanitary conditions. Mobile workers and day laborers are expected to fend for themselves. Migrant workers, far from home, often find themselves with no access to local markets and no means to store or cook food. Night shift-workers find they have few meal options after hours. Hundreds of millions of workers face an undesirable eating arrangement every day. Many go hungry; many get sick, sooner or later. The result is a staggering blow to productivity and health. Poorer nations, in particular, remain in a cycle of poor nutrition, poor health, low productivity, low wages and no development.

Access to healthy food (and protection from unsafe and unhealthy food and eating arrangements) is as essential as protection from workplace chemicals or noise. Workplace meal programs can prevent micronutrient deficiencies and chronic diseases, including obesity. Investments in nutrition are repaid in a reduction of sick days and accidents and an increase in productivity and morale. For example, adequate nourishment can raise national productivity levels by 20 percent. Conversely, micronutrient deficiencies account for a 2-3 percent loss in GDP in low-income countries; and in South Asia, iron deficiency alone accounts for a loss of US\$5 billion in productivity. As much as a 30 percent impairment in physical work capacity and performance is reported in iron-deficient men and women. Obesity and diabetes accounts for up to 15 percent of total health costs in some industrialized countries; and studies have shown that obese workers are twice as likely as fit workers to miss work. Diabetes, now the leading cause of death in Mexico and rapidly becoming epidemic in Colombia, is almost entirely controllable via diet, and yet diabetes costs the United States over US\$130 billion annually to treat.

In wealthier nations, where obesity and related non-communicable diseases are epidemic, we find some employers offering healthier menus or better access to healthier foods, such as on-site farmers' markets.

In developing and emerging economies, where hunger and micronutrient deficiencies such as anaemia are epidemic, we find some employers offering free, well-balanced meals or access to safer street foods. We in fact have found “food solutions” that can fit businesses of all sizes and locations.

In summary, this presentation will demonstrate how good nutrition is a sound investment. Proper nutrition leads to gains in productivity and worker morale, prevention of accidents and premature deaths, and reductions in health-care costs. Workers’ meal programs are good for workers, good for business and good for nations.

Key words: Workers, cafeteria, nutrition.