

Combatting 'cake culture'

Nutrition can get missed in employers' focus on wellness, fitness initiatives

BY SARAH DOBSON

IT'S a scenario that plays out on a daily basis in many a workplace. A colleague is celebrating his birthday so people gather round to sing well wishes while enjoying a slice of cake. And more than likely, just a few days later, it happens all over again, for a birthday, a baby shower or an anniversary.

But this "cake culture" is a problem, according to the Faculty of Dental Surgery in the United Kingdom, which put out a mission statement on the topic. Its concern? The workplace is now the main place where many people eat sugar.

"Managers want to reward staff for their efforts, colleagues want to celebrate special occasions and workers want to bring back a gift from their holidays. While these sweet treats might be well-meaning, they are also contributing to the current obesity epidemic and poor oral health," said Nigel Hunt, dean of the dental faculty at the Royal College of Surgeons in London.

"It is something that is happening worldwide, as a culture, this idea of just having sweets and snacks constantly available, particularly in open plan offices and so on... and really what it does do is it accounts for well over the daily recommended intake of sugar in that period of time (six teaspoons of sugar)."

The faculty is really concerned by the rising number of children and adults who need to have their teeth out, for example, because of severe tooth decay, he said.

"We've got this obesity epidemic now and over 63 per cent of adults in England are classified either as obese or overweight, so we really

did feel that it's time to bring about a cultural change to the way that this cake culture is developing."

Bad habits

One of the biggest predictors of what people are going to eat is what's around them, said Krista Merner, dietitian and owner of Bent Fork Nutrition in Halifax.

"Often, we spend more time at work than home, so that can be a pretty big indicator of what might be tempting us. Even we if pack our lunch at home, if you've got vending machines or there's cake in the snack room or someone's selling chocolate bars for a fundraiser, that's going to be the environment we're often in the most."

And in trying to be more health-conscious, many people bring the bad stuff from home, she said.

"Workplaces can become the dumping ground, particularly after Valentine's Day or Easter or Halloween... but then we sit at work with it all day."

In looking at hunger cues, people don't necessarily eat because they're hungry, said Merner, "so if you're stressed or you're tired or you're looking for that quick sugar fix because you had a slump in the afternoon, if that's what's around, that's what we're going to grab."

It's a crash-and-crave cycle, she said. "When you are low in the sense that you haven't eaten in a while, your blood sugar might be starting to dip down, we're not always going to take time to cut up the vegetables, get out some whole-grain crackers and pair it with some hummus. We're going to

grab whatever's easiest and it's typically a higher calorie but maybe not as nutritionally balanced choice... and because there's nothing really nutritious in there to keep us stable, we crash again."

Employer's role

Employers can be the voice of health and reason, according to Andrea Holwegner, founder and president of Health Stand Nutrition Consulting in Calgary.

"It's such a critical time for health because so many more meals are consumed at work for a lot of people than they are at home," she said.

"It's such an important consideration for employers because workplace productivity, on a basic, fundamental level, is tied so strongly to nutrition habits."

Companies spend thousands of dollars on systems and technology, project management tools and productivity experts "when they fail to actually look at the most basic reason people struggle with productivity, which is our people are either underfed, overfed, over-caffeinated or over-sugared," said Holwegner.

"It's completely overlooked and so basic and immediate; it is an immediate connection to productivity, confidence for the sales team, how you feel for overall energy, how nice you play with others. Our blood sugars are so tied to nutrition so if we're either not getting enough or not getting the right nutrition, it's directly going to affect our ability to focus, concentrate, and just have a good overall mood."

Many companies with wellness programs tackle fitness initiatives

and stress reduction, but they completely neglect the nutrition piece, she said.

"It's almost like 'We don't know what to do with it, we know it's an issue but we don't know what to do with it.' So there's a lot of things you can do that are super cost-effective in just the way you restructure things."

Healthier alternatives

There needs to be a culture change in the workplace that encourages healthy eating and helps workers avoid caving in to sweet temptations, said Hunt.

"There's almost a pressure aspect to the office culture, and that is you get in one office worker who brings in a cake for a birthday or is back from a holiday destination, or whatever it may be, and there's almost this feeling of obligation that everyone else has to do the same. We have got evidence of people who have been on weight-loss programs and say they find it incredibly difficult to cope with this office situation because they feel so much peer pressure and don't want to be the odd one out," he said.

"We're not trying to be party poopers here, we're not trying to stop it completely, we're just trying to get a gradual change, to get people to think about what they are doing and alternatives that could be available which are much more healthy."

People can get scared when they feel like they're messing with a learned tradition like bringing in fruit instead of cake for a birthday, said Merner.

“Sometimes, it’s just opening up that channel of communication,” she said. “(It’s about) ‘We’re going to put healthier choices as the more available option because we know that’s what keeps us happy and healthy and focused at work and happier with ourselves,’ as opposed to focusing on ‘We’re taking away the cake because it’s not good for you.’”

A lot of the time, there’s very little thought about food choices and people just get into bad routines, said Holwegner.

“It’s ‘Well, we’ve always done it that way, this is our vendor, our sup-

plier, and we didn’t see those options on the menu.”

It’s about upper leadership team taking the lead by choosing healthier options, such as no longer supplying pop, she said. “I would divert junk food budgets and vending machine budgets.”

Providing fridges and food preparation stations can also help, said Merner.

“If we can foster that environment, then it makes it easier to do it, and I think healthy is often the harder choice, so if we can make it easier, then that will help our employees go that route,” she said.

“Overall, I would find that most workplaces are getting healthier, but it comes back a lot to the convenience piece and what’s available.”

One Halifax call centre, for example, provides workers with fruit each day, said Merner.

“It’s visible, it’s easy, it’s already prewashed, you grab it and go back to your cubicle.... So it’s a nice bonus.”

Fresh fruit platters or bowls of nuts are good alternatives, said Hunt, who cited the example of Google when it concealed sweets in opaque containers to make them less visible and harder to reach,

while healthy alternatives were more prominent. New York employees ate 3.1 million fewer calories over the course of seven weeks.

“If you just take them out of eyesight, then people are far less likely to keep dipping into the tin of chocolates or whatever it may be that’s on the desk,” he said.

Happily, the culture is changing — gradually, said Hunt.

“It isn’t something that we expect to happen overnight — look how long it took for smoking to have a cultural change — but it’s the same principle and I think we’ve just got to keep on drip feeding into this.”