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New study determines ROI on workplace wellness investments

While employers know intuitively that investments in workplace wellness make for healthier and more productive team members, the lingering question with workplace wellness investments continues to be - do such investments provide a clear return on investment?

A new study by the Institute of Health Economics examining Alberta Blue Cross's digital wellness programs has answered that question with a resounding yes.

Digital wellness programs have gained prominence as a means of providing employees with convenient access to a full suite of supports to help them maintain their health and promote their well-being. Such programs can include online health risk assessments, symptom checkers, access to online learning and content, integration with wearable tracking devices, mental health support resources, health coaching and guides to manage chronic health conditions.

“As the world has shifted online over the last 18 months through the pandemic with work-from-home becoming the norm, digital wellness programs have taken on increased relevance as a way for employers to support team members to stay well while working remotely,” says Melanie Fuller, Director of Wellness, with Alberta Blue Cross. “In this context, establishing the impact of digital wellness programs is imperative.”

Using data from Alberta Blue Cross, the Institute of Health Economics conducted an analysis of the impact of the benefit provider's digital wellness programs on cost and volume of claims, as well as changes to health factors when engaging with the programs. Considering the impact of the pandemic, the research included a sensitivity analysis to control for the impact of the pandemic during the overlapping study period. The study determined measurable improvements for more than 360,000 of Alberta Blue Cross's 1.8 million plan members who utilized the programs across four domains of wellness: respiratory, cardiac, mental, and physical health.

The Institute found that 81.5 per cent of participants experienced improvement across the 30 months following the programs being in place for a wide range of health indicators. Equally important, from an economic perspective the study findings also provide an indicator of cost savings to benefit plans—as the Institute extrapolated a corresponding 14 per cent reduction in claims volume resulting from healthier employee populations with reduced plan utilization.

“These results are particularly important in the context of chronic disease conditions, where cost avoidance not only supports the sustainability of group benefit plans for cost drivers such as prescription drugs but helps to avoid employer cost liabilities associated with disability claims,” says Fuller. “And we know that at the same time, healthier employees having less illness means higher levels of productivity.”

More details about the study are available on the Alberta Blue Cross website at ab.bluecross.ca/pdfs/group/new-research-supports-ROI-for-workplace-wellness-investments.pdf

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