

Nutrition and healthy diet

Good nutrition has a positive impact on occupational safety and health, workplace productivity. It is well documented that unhealthy foods can lead to obesity and chronic diseases, while macro and micro-nutrient deficiencies can cause malnutrition. In both these instances, the effects are detrimental to a strong, well-equipped workforce. What workers eat influences their health and their productivity, so it is in the interest of all the social partners unions, workers, employers and governments around the world to contribute in their different ways to good nutrition and a healthy diet at work.

Impact of diet on performance and health

How nutrition impacts on health and productivity depends on the type of diet. In many developing countries, under-nutrition in poor populations is frequent. Iron deficiency is an important factor in restricting growth and general health in poor communities in many national economies. According to the WHO, a deficiency of iron results in extreme fatigue for 740 million adults world-wide, affecting their ability to work effectively. At the other extreme of the scale, in places where large quantities of food high in fat and sugar content are easily available, an obesity epidemic is fast developing. It has been calculated that in the USA 39.2 million work days per year are lost to illness related to obesity. The worst situation is found in countries that are experiencing what has been called the “nutrition transition” where a large proportion of workers with low-wages suffer from malnutrition from a deficient diet which is a combination of nutritional deficiency with more access to processed, high-fat and high-sugar foods in large quantities at a relative low cost.

What can be done?

Ensuring that workers have access to nutritious, safe and affordable food, an adequate meal break and decent conditions for eating is not only socially important and economically viable but a profitable business practice too. Most workers eat at least one main meal during their working day. Ensuring that this meal meets the nutritional needs of workers is the most direct intervention that can be made. An often-overlooked issue in nutrition is access to clean drinking water. While food choices are essentially down to the individual, no-one is free from the influence of their environment. Changing the social environment to encourage healthy eating is also part of the contribution workplaces can make. Valuable practical food solutions which can be adapted to workplaces of different sizes and with different budgets, such as setting out key points for designing a meal programme, including canteens, meal or food vouchers, mess rooms and kitchenettes, and partnerships with local vendors. Relevant laws, regulations and guides pertaining to meal breaks and workplace nutrition are already in place in a number of countries. A further asset that workplaces can make use of is the possibility of combining healthy eating with other initiatives which may motivate people in different ways. These can include safety and health campaigns, and workers' assistance programmes. If the provision of appropriate food is flanked by health education activities and opportunities to make exercise, the chances of having a positive impact on health are higher. Whatever approach is chosen, it is vital for workers to be involved in the entire process to be sure their needs are being met, which is one of the key factors for success.