

Rebalancing Nutrition after Lockdown



Understanding diet and nutrition, and how employers can help

Last summer, [a poll for the British Nutrition Foundation](#) (BNF) highlighted what many of us had already discovered happens when you're forcibly stuck at home for weeks on end and feeling a bit anxious about a global pandemic.

More than a quarter (27%) of the 2,000 people surveyed admitted to piling into the kitchen and comfort-eating junk food, with stress, anxiety, boredom and tiredness being key triggers. Combine this with [more people also hitting the bottle during lockdown](#) and a potentially worrying health and wellbeing picture begins to emerge of the past 12 months.

First, of course, there is the Covid factor. After Prime Minister Boris Johnson had recovered from his bout of Covid-19 last April, which required a spell in intensive care, he admitted one of the reasons it had been so severe was because he had been "[way overweight](#)".

That prompted him, in turn, to launch a "[Better Health](#)" obesity campaign designed to encourage people to be more active and lose weight. The fact that, in December, the think-tank The Social Market Foundation concluded this [had been ineffective and largely unsuccessful](#) only serves to illustrate just what a tough public health nut this is to crack

Links between nutrition, diet and poor health

Worries about the UK's rising levels of [adult and childhood obesity](#) predate the pandemic, of course. [Poor diet and obesity](#) can contribute to health conditions such as diabetes, high cholesterol, coronary heart disease, musculoskeletal problems, high blood pressure, stroke and some types of cancer. These, in turn, can have an impact on productivity – an individual's ability to work and function effectively at a day-to-day level, their energy and stamina, and even, if things get serious, their ability to remain in the workplace.

Outside of health and wellbeing, people who are obese or even just overweight can find themselves on the receiving end of stigma, disadvantage and discrimination, [as a recent report](#) by the Institute for Employment Studies concluded.

So, as an employer, there are many good reasons to be communicating positive health, diet and nutrition messages. Yet, at the same time, before diving into this area, it is a good idea to pause and take stock, to think about how best to approach what can be potentially a challenging area, for you as an employer, to be dipping your toes into.

This is because nutrition, diet and weight can be personal, sensitive and, sometimes, complex to navigate. There can, for instance, be perils around 'fat shaming', even if unintentional, and pitfalls around messaging that doesn't take account of, say, existing disabilities, ongoing or chronic health conditions, allergies or food intolerances or even eating disorders. [Recent figures from NHS England](#), for example, have suggested as many as one in five women and one in eight men screened positive for a possible eating disorder in 2019.

Having said that, the fact many of us may be feeling less healthy than we were before the pandemic may also mean employers are pushing at something of an open door when it comes to getting messages out there around good diet, nutrition and healthier lifestyle choices.

For all of you who have successfully used the past 12 months of lockdowns to get fit, lose weight, cut down on drinking and switch to a healthier diet – well done. Many, however, have found the past year challenging when it comes to maintaining healthy habits.

With spring on the way and, hopefully, better Covid times on the horizon, now is a good time for employers to be refocusing on diet and nutrition-based health promotion.

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WPA is a specialist not-for-profit health insurer. With a history dating back to 1901 they look after private individuals, families and all businesses from micro enterprises through to blue chip global brands.

Good nutrition equals great fuel – support while working from home

The first question to address is whether you want to approach nutrition and diet as a discrete, standalone health promotion topic or wrap it into wider messages around sedentary working, exercise and healthier living, whether while working from home or more 'normally'.

Producing and communicating some fun or engaging digital or physical recipe or menu cards may be one option to consider. These could be standalone resources or perhaps attached to some other form of regular communication. Equally, you could build resources on your intranet linking to menu plans, food shopping (and budgeting), nutrition and dietary advice.

You could look into the feasibility of setting up an internal webinar, or series of webinars, led by an independent expert or using in-house expertise, such as a member of your occupational health team or canteen supervisor, to discuss practical ways to make a difference.

You might also want to look into making this something more bottom-up, more employee-led – maybe make it a competition? This could be through encouraging employees to share menu or healthy recipe tips between themselves, perhaps via some form of virtual nutrition/health/diet club.

There has also been much talk in recent years of the value of 'nudge theory' in terms of encouraging behaviour change around eating, exercise and weight loss. [One study](#), for example, found regular 'nudges' led to a 15% increase in people making healthier choices.

[Examples of potentially effective 'nudges'](#) can include making healthier options more visible on the shelf or menu, and adding nutrition or calorie counts to labelling. You can focus on changing attitudes, for example by encouraging people to experiment with new ingredients or flavours that happen to be healthier. We are only limited by our imagination.

Support for when more 'normal' working returns

Looking beyond the pandemic, there are things you can be putting in place (or looking to reinstate) for when things return to being more 'normal'. This can include encouraging those who are eligible to go for their [NHS Health Check](#) when they restart.

You can also look at implementing or offering employer-led wellbeing, weight, BMI (body mass index) and waist measurement, blood pressure, cholesterol, blood sugar and body composition checks – and education around them and why they're important. However, again, these must of course be conducted in a sensitive and body-positive manner.

Consider, too, how or if it is possible to align any future activity to relevant upcoming health awareness days or weeks. For example, the BNF will be running [a Healthy Eating Week](#) this year between 14-18 June. Overlapping it this year, from 14-20 June (as it usually takes place in March but has slipped because of the pandemic) will be [Nutrition and Hydration Week](#).

Finally, within all this focus on physical health, don't forget that any discussion around nutrition, diet, weight and obesity needs to take into account mental as well as physical health. This is especially the case when it comes to thinking about things such as eating disorders, body image, obesity-related stigma or bullying and worries or anxieties associated with weight- or diet-related health conditions.

Therefore, alongside practical nutrition and diet advice and support, it may be important to consider access to resources such as confidential counselling through an employee assistance programme, psychological support and even signposting to more specialist support through your occupational health team or provider.

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