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WORLD DIABETES DAY 2025

Workplaces must tackle diabetes risk

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EACH year on November 14, people across the globe mark World Diabetes Day, commemorating the birthday of Sir Frederick Banting, co-discoverer of insulin.

The International Diabetes Federation's theme for 2025 is "Diabetes and Well-Being", with a special focus on "Diabetes and the Workplace." This emphasis is especially urgent in South Africa, where diabetes is increasing rapidly and the workplace is both an arena of risk and of opportunity.

Globally, more than 580 million adults live with diabetes, and this number is projected to exceed 700 million by 2045. In South Africa, over 2.3 million adults are affected and nearly half remain undiagnosed. Sedentary lifestyles, urbanisation, processed diets, and socio-economic disparities are major drivers of the epidemic.

Obesity is closely linked: excess weight increases insulin resistance, accelerates the onset of type 2 diabetes, and heightens many of the complications. Together, diabetes and obesity place a heavy burden on both individuals and the national economy. In South Africa, diabetes is already the second leading cause of death among women and contributes heavily to cardiovascular disease, kidney failure, and preventable amputations.

But diabetes (and its twin challenge, obesity) is not solely a public health concern; it impacts workplaces. It affects employees' productivity and well-being and leads to absenteeism, making the workplace a critical site for both risk and intervention.

Even healthcare professionals are

not immune. A 2019 study at a local hospital found high rates of overweight, obesity, hypertension, unhealthy levels of fats in the blood and undiagnosed high blood sugar levels among hospital staff, including doctors, nurses and support personnel. This points to a stark reality: medical knowledge alone does not guarantee protection and even workplaces the medical sector must actively respond.

Employees living with diabetes or at high risk frequently encounter workplace-specific obstacles such as:

- Limited time for blood-glucose monitoring or medication administration during shifts.
- Inadequate access to healthy meals or safe spaces for physical activity.
- Difficulty navigating work demands, follow-up appointments, lifestyle management.
- Space that tacitly encourage sedentary behaviour or unhealthy food choices.

This shows that managing diabetes (and obesity) is not only a matter of individual responsibility. The workplace environment plays a pivotal role in making health management realistic or not.

In South Africa, the workforce faces distinct pressures: long commutes, irregular hours, informal employment, and socio-economic constraints. These amplify the risk that the workplace becomes a health adversary rather than a health enabler. But well-designed workplace interventions can turn the tide, for example, by:

- Offering regular wellness checks (glucose, cholesterol, blood pressure, body weight) to detect early warning signs.
- Providing access to nutritious

meals, clean drinking water and opportunities for light physical activity during the workday.

- Creating discreet spaces for glucose testing or medication to reduce interruption and stigma.

- Supporting mental health, counselling and a positive workplace culture to help employees manage the stress of chronic diseases.

- Providing weight management support, which is essential given the link between obesity and diabetes.

Supporting employees with diabetes (and obesity) is not only a health priority – enhanced well-being translates into improved productivity, reduced absenteeism and stronger economic outcomes. South Africa faces a dual burden of non-communicable diseases (like diabetes, obesity) and infectious diseases such as HIV and TB. Many communities struggle with access to nutritious food, safe exercise areas, and quality healthcare.

Newer therapies, monitoring technologies and weight management programmes are often concentrated in the private sector, leaving public-sector employees and informal workers underserved. Any workplace-focused approach must be equitable: ensuring that all employees, not only those with higher incomes or private medical coverage, have the tools to manage their health, achieve well-being and reduce risk.

There is growing evidence that well-designed workplace interventions can meaningfully improve employees' health and reduce their risk of diabetes. A combination of several studies shows that multi-component programmes (dietary change + physical activity + education/coaching) yield

modest but meaningful reductions in glycosylated haemoglobin (a measure of the average blood sugar levels over the past 2–3 months), weight and other cardiometabolic markers (tests that indicate the risk of heart disease, diabetes, or related health problems) among employees at risk of diabetes.

A 2024 South African study of a worksite canteen plus a behavioural intervention found that a food-environment only arm decreased cardiometabolic risk among employees, and the addition of a lifestyle programme further improved uptake, reinforcing the role of the workplace in diabetes/obesity prevention. One limitation: while the magnitude of change is often modest, the cumulative impact at a population level and across numerous workplaces can be substantial.

World Diabetes Day 2025 offers South Africa an opportunity to move from awareness to action. The evidence and our local context show that the workplace is a vital intervention point. Diabetes and obesity are preventable, manageable and, in some cases, reversible.

Ensuring well-being at work is not simply the right thing to do; it's an investment in productivity, economic growth and national health. By transforming workplaces from risk environments into supportive spaces, South Africa can empower employees across all sectors, income-levels and job-types to live and work well with diabetes (and obesity).

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