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**PINELLAS COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT**

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## Preventing disease through healthy behaviors at work

Chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer, stroke, chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases and diabetes are the leading causes of death in Pinellas County. Unhealthy behaviors – such as tobacco use, improper diet and lack of physical activity – cause many of these diseases.

Americans spend at least 40 percent of each day at work. As leading employers in the county, governmental agencies can play an important role in promoting healthy lifestyles and behaviors – starting with their employees. The Pinellas County Health Department has taken on a leadership role in addressing chronic disease prevention and promoting healthy lifestyles. Pinellas County Health Department employees are encouraged to model healthy behavior at home and at work.

Policies that support healthy eating and daily physical activity are an important part of creating a healthy workplace. In March, the Pinellas County Health Department, through a policy drafted by the agency's healthy behaviors team, initiated a worksite wellness policy. The policy supports wellness within the workplace by addressing health department employees' ability to make healthy choices at work. The policy includes best practices for promoting physical activity and good nutrition at work.

For example, the health department changed the vending machines at all five of its health center locations. The employee-led healthy behaviors team worked with the agency's registered dietitians to establish nutritional standards for the vending machines, which now contain a selection of healthy snacks and drinks. Examples include baked chips, water, diet beverages and 100 percent fruit juices.

Other components of the policy include flexible work schedules to allow employees to increase their leisure time or decrease their commute time and on-site physical activities for employees during break times. Yoga, Tae-Bo and daily walks are scheduled during break and lunch hours. The policy also addresses the accessibility and safety of stairwells, encouraging employees to take the stairs instead of the elevator. The stairwells in the St. Petersburg Health Center display physical activity images and messages and signs hang throughout the building encouraging employees to "Take the Stairs."

One way to increase access to healthy choices is to educate and heighten awareness among employees. At the Pinellas County Health Department, employees are required to complete four hours of healthy behaviors training each year. Training areas include tobacco, nutrition, physical activity and preventing chronic disease.

As one of the county's largest government employers, the Pinellas County Health Department is leading the way in looking for ways to promote chronic disease prevention within its employee population and the Pinellas County community. The agency's new worksite wellness policy supports employees' healthy behavior choices at work and encourages employees to become public health heroes in fighting chronic disease in Pinellas County.

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