

RALLY®

Reversing the Pandemic's Heart-Health Crisis

How to address the nation's
No.1 killer head-on.



Pulse Check


Stress. Weight gain. Disrupted sleep. Delayed care.

The pandemic has exacerbated many of the factors that put employees at greater risk for heart disease — already the nation’s No. 1 killer and most costly disease. That should set off warning bells for employers, who bear much of the financial brunt of that burden.

\$1,100 
in lost productivity per employee with heart disease, per year

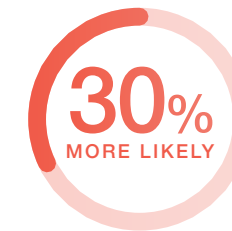
13 
lost work days per employee with heart disease, per year

\$1,119 
higher direct insurance spend, per employee with heart disease, per year

1 out of every 4 
deaths is caused by heart disease

As you plan for a safe reopening and post-pandemic recovery, we know there’s no shortage of priorities competing for your attention. But it’s essential to understand that so many of the modern crises felt by employees — mental health concerns, financial fears, social isolation, delayed care and screenings — also create a multiplier effect for the heart health risk factors employees may be shouldering.

That’s especially true for employees of color and vulnerable communities, as heart disease affects many groups unevenly.



Black adults, for instance, face a significantly higher prevalence of risk factors, higher hospitalization rates for heart failure, and are **30% more likely to die from heart disease** than non-Hispanic white adults.

Similarly, when Northwestern University researchers examined social vulnerability at the county level (taking into account everything from income and education levels to housing types and transportation access), they found higher social vulnerability tracked to higher mortality rates from cardiovascular disease.

For all employees, helping address and lower heart disease risks won’t only move the needle on productivity and health care costs, but may also be the very real difference between life and death.

The Heart of the Matter

For most, this condition is highly preventable, and workplace well-being offerings can help. The main risk factors include:

- High blood pressure
- Obesity
- Physical inactivity
- High cholesterol
- Chronic stress
- Insufficient sleep
- Tobacco use

500,000+
Americans die of heart disease every year

Building a Better Toolbox

There's no single step that can take someone's risk of heart disease to zero. Instead, clinicians concerned about heart disease will help patients control everything from high blood pressure to tobacco use, stress levels to maintaining a healthy weight.

In the same way, there's no single solution employers can use to eradicate heart disease. Workplace strategies to reverse the pandemic's dangerous effects on heart health must take a holistic lens, helping individuals identify and combat the underlying causes putting them at higher risk.

In-person and traditional care channels will always be valuable. But digital health tools are a proven and powerful way to boost engagement, sustain motivation, and get results. Employees today aren't only comfortable accessing digital offerings — they've come to expect the convenience, portability, and personalization those solutions provide. At Rally, our digital health programs have shown:



58 minutes

spent engaging in **Wellness Coaching** online learning, on average, with **74% course completion**



12%

lower medical costs and **2.3:1 ROI** over three years with the Real Appeal weight loss program



95%

satisfaction among employers who offer the Quit For Life digital smoking cessation program, with a **proven quit rate of 51% at six months post-enrollment**

Amplify Your Impact

When it comes to building a heart-healthy workforce, digital solutions can make a difference by allowing employees to self-manage lifestyle changes that are proven to effectively lower heart disease risk and by extending providers' capacity to care for patients.

Coaching can amplify those efforts even further. Connecting with a coach — whether in small-group settings or for one-on-one support — can deliver more individualized recommendations and engagement strategies, to effectively motivate behavior change and reduce risk. It also allows for more varied and flexible options to meet individual employees' preferences.

Addressing the urgent and high-stakes heart-health needs of employees requires strategies centered on smart, proven solutions and clearly defined goals. In the following pages, we identify the most pressing heart-health priorities — and how to address them.



Hypertension and High Cholesterol

Both high blood pressure and high cholesterol are significant risk factors for heart disease, yet they've earned the nickname "silent killers" because these conditions have no signs or symptoms. The only way employees will know if these conditions need to be addressed is if they have their blood pressure and cholesterol checked.



1/3

of Americans who have high blood pressure **aren't aware they have it**



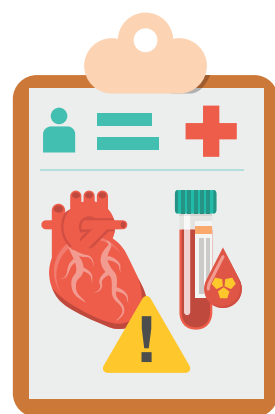
< 1/2

of Americans who could benefit from cholesterol medication **are currently taking it**



37%

increase in the odds of having high blood pressure during the pandemic



Even for employees who went into the pandemic with healthy levels, the past year may be pushing these numbers in the wrong direction. When doctors studied emergency department visits over a three-month period in mid-2020, they found pandemic-related social isolation increased the odds of having high blood pressure by more than one-third, even after taking age and gender into account.

The Power of Employer Sponsored Programs

A 2020 JAMA Cardiology study of more than 4,000 employees with high blood pressure found that a workplace-based program was significantly more effective than usual care in improving blood pressure. Participants also reported lower perceived stress, lower rates of alcohol consumption, and healthy diet changes.

How Employers Can Help

Offer Health Screenings

Offer onsite or at-home health screenings that include blood pressure and cholesterol checks. That's crucial even for younger employees — nearly one in four adults ages 20 to 44 have high blood pressure.

Make it Personal

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends connecting employees to health coaches or counselors who can promote healthy habits and tailor interventions for the individual or small group.

Offer Blood Pressure Cuffs

Consider making blood pressure cuffs available for self-monitoring. Currently only 5% of employers do this, according to the CDC, but self-monitoring is a proven tool to better manage high blood pressure.

Real Appeal®

“In a study of more than 2,600 Real Appeal participants, those who lost at least 5% of their body weight lowered their total cholesterol 7 points more than non-participants on average.”



Engage Employee Groups

Focus on employee groups that may face the dual burden of greater risk factors and uneven access to care. For example, hypertension is far more common among Black Americans, yet white Americans have higher rates of control, the CDC reports.

Take a Holistic Approach

Take a holistic approach by educating employees and offering programs that focus both on condition management and lifestyle factors that are proven to prevent high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

Share Resources

Send employees actionable articles, such as...

- [Biometrics: The 4 Most Important Numbers for Your Health](#)
- [17 Pantry Recipes for a Healthy Heart](#)
- [4 Easy Tips to Help You Walk 10,000 Steps Every Day](#)



Chronic Stress

Stress isn't only an emotional state. It can trigger biochemical and physiological changes — like reduced blood flow to the heart, increased cortisol, and greater cardiac reactivity — that put employees at significantly greater risk of heart disease. At the same time, research suggests that heightened stress may increase the odds that an employee will adopt unhealthy lifestyle behaviors, such as smoking or inactivity, that put their heart health in greater danger.



“Heightened stress may increase the odds that an employee will adopt unhealthy lifestyle behaviors, such as smoking or inactivity, that put their heart health in greater danger.”

The pandemic has ratcheted many employees' stress levels sky high, as they may be juggling health anxieties, disrupted routines, financial uncertainty, social isolation, and more. When the American Psychological Association surveyed more than 3,000 people about stress during the pandemic, it found that stress levels shot up significantly — the first such uptick since the survey began in 2007. Working parents and people of color were both more likely to report significantly higher stress levels than their peers.



The Power of Employer Sponsored Programs

A Frontiers in Psychology study found that an eight-week stress management program effectively lowered employee stress, compared with a control group, and the employees who completed the stress management program still showed lower levels of stress two months after the program ended.



How Employers Can Help

Promote Workplace Offerings

Remind employees of any supportive workplace offerings and tools that may help address their stressors directly: employee assistance programs for financial and emotional counseling, backup child care services, and schedule flexibility.

Address Stress Management

Make stress management part of the business culture — and workplace conversations. Encourage employees to take regular breaks and prioritize their mental health, and train managers to recognize signs of burnout.

Wellness Coaching

In a Rally survey of people who took the Stress Less course as part of Rally's Wellness Coaching program:



86% were confident they could better manage their stress after completing the course



68% attributed that behavior change directly to the program

Offer Virtual Coaching

Offer virtual coaching programs for stress management, so employees can access effective, convenient help at their fingertips, without having the added complexities of traveling or taking time away from their work or family.

Share Resources

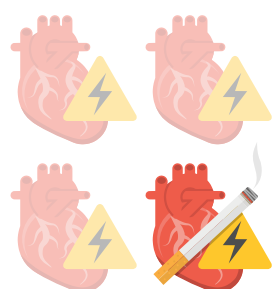
Send employees actionable articles, such as...

- [A Year of Stress May Be Messing With Your Body \(And How to Fix It\)](#)
- [Two-Minute Stress Relievers You Can Do Anywhere](#)
- [8 Ways to Keep Stress in Check](#)



Tobacco Use

One in every four deaths from heart disease is connected to smoking. Tobacco use is also responsible for nearly \$170 billion of direct medical spend for adults, and more than \$156 billion in lost productivity, the CDC reports. According to the American Lung Association, employers can save nearly \$6,000 per year for every employee who quits smoking.



1/4

of deaths from heart disease are connected to smoking

Unfortunately, research shows that tobacco use has seen an uptick during the pandemic, as stress and boredom collide with more opportunities to smoke. And the number of people seeking help to quit has dropped by 27%, according to the North American Quitline Consortium.



\$6,000

employer savings per year for every employee who quits smoking



27%

decrease in the number of people seeking help to quit smoking during the pandemic



The Power of Employer Sponsored Programs

A meta-analysis of nearly 20 research studies found that employees achieve a higher quit rate with targeted interventions, compared with a control group.



How Employers Can Help

Take a Baseline

Survey employees to determine levels of tobacco use and awareness of the smoking cessation benefits available to them, the CDC recommends. This baseline can help shape communications and program recruitment.

Offer a Coaching Component

Look for a tobacco cessation program that provides individualized support. A coaching component can boost accountability and program adherence, while features like text-messaging and toll-free access to staff can better meet diverse employee needs.

Address Underlying Triggers

Promote access to employee assistance programs and digital health tools that can help address underlying triggers, such as stress, inactivity, and sleep issues.

Quit For Life[®]

The Rally Quit For Life smoking cessation benefit has helped:

4.3 Million

people quit smoking over the past 30 years

2:1 ROI

projected program return over 2 years



Pick an Evidence-based Program

Offer an evidence-based smoking cessation program that's designed to help employees set a quit date, manage urges effectively, create a tobacco-proof environment, tap social supports, and use cessation medications effectively.

Incentivize Employees

Incentivize employees to quit. A New England Journal of Medicine study found that when employees were offered a cash incentive, smoking abstinence follow-through was more than 10 times greater than in the control group.

Share Resources

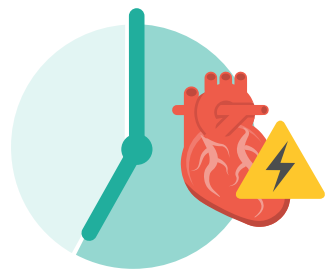
Send employees actionable articles, such as...

- [How to Cut Back on Smoking](#)
- [Need Another Reason to Quit Vaping? COVID-19](#)



Sleep

Dozing off during work or sluggish productivity are far from the only consequences of employees not getting enough shut-eye: In addition to a heightened risk of heart attack, adults who sleep fewer than seven hours a night are also more likely to have high blood pressure, Type 2 diabetes and obesity. All of which can put people at greater risk for heart disease.



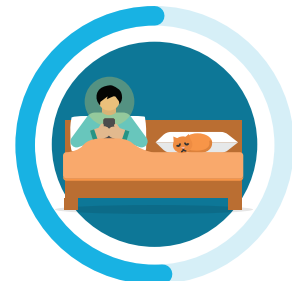
<7 hours

Adults who sleep less than 7 hours each night are more likely to have a heart attack



1/3+

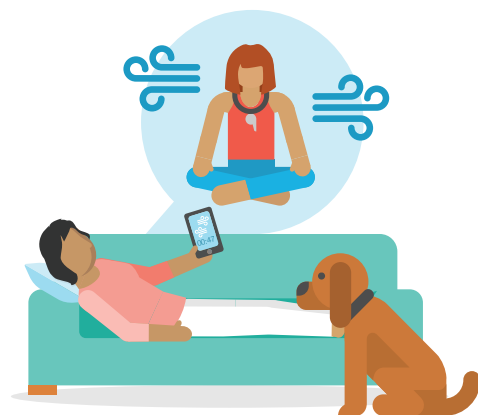
of Americans don't get the recommended amount of sleep



57%

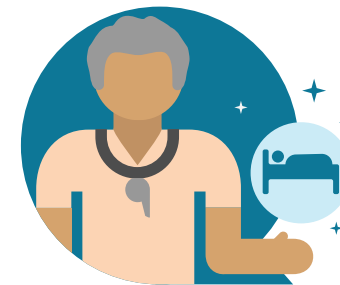
of adults have suffered significantly worse sleep quality or duration during the pandemic

For many, the pandemic has made it harder to get adequate high-quality sleep, and this is no longer seen as an at-home health issue. In fact, 53% of employers plan to offer apps or programs to support sleep and relaxation by 2022, according to research by Willis Towers Watson. Researchers note that such steps are increasingly a competitive advantage in the talent market.



The Power of Employer Sponsored Programs

Employer sponsored sleep programs were helpful in improving employee sleep duration and subsequent daytime performance, according to a 2019 meta-analysis of 20 studies.



How Employers Can Help

Address Underlying Issues

Remind employees of existing tools and programs that may help them address issues contributing to their sleep challenges, whether that's financial counseling through an employee assistance program or a digital stress management tool.

Train Managers

Train managers and employees alike to recognize the signs and symptoms of fatigue and inefficient sleep, the CDC recommends.

Wellness Coaching

In a Rally survey of employees who completed the Sleep Well course in Rally's Wellness Coaching program:



84% said they'd continue practicing behavior changes learned in the program



67% attributed positive changes to their participation

Offer Coaching Sessions

Offer targeted advice and personalized tips, through individual or small-group coaching sessions. There can be dozens of reasons underpinning sleep disturbances, and a personalized approach can be vital to getting results.

Share Resources

Send employees actionable articles, such as...

- [5 Tips to Sleep Better When You Worry About Not Sleeping](#)
- [What to Eat \(and Skip\) for a Better Night's Sleep](#)
- [5 Signs You Need Better Sleep](#)



Maintaining a Healthy Weight

The “quarantine 15” has become a common phrase people use to make light of the extra weight they’ve put on during the pandemic — as shifts in eating patterns, stress, routine, and opportunities to exercise create the perfect storm for weight gain. But those extra pounds can carry serious health consequences.



\$117 billion

in health care costs each year linked to low physical activity



27%

decline in physical activity as shown from smartphone step-counting apps



57 fewer minutes

of movement each week, as people exercise less during the pandemic

In many ways, the pandemic has only worsened the gap between how much people should be and are moving. One study that used anonymized data from 450,000 smartphone step-counting apps showed a sharp decline in physical activity (as high as 27%), while another study found that nearly two-thirds of people were exercising less during the pandemic — getting 57 fewer minutes of movement each week.



Even for employees with no other risk factors, not getting enough physical activity ups the odds of developing heart disease. Unhealthy eating patterns, including too much sodium, saturated fat, and added sugar, also increase the risk for heart disease, according to the CDC.



“Unhealthy eating patterns, including too much sodium, saturated fat, and added sugar, increase the risk for heart disease.”

The Power of Employer Sponsored Programs

Employer sponsored programs to bolster healthy eating and physical activity can certainly deliver health benefits. Case in point: Real Appeal, a scalable digital program with a strong coaching component. In a study of 15,000 people over three years, those who attended at least four sessions lost, on average, 3.7% of their body weight. The benefits extended beyond employees’ waistlines to employer wallets: Researchers found that medical expenditures were \$771 less per employee on average. In aggregate, these medical cost savings were more than double the program costs, resulting in a 2.3:1 ROI.

Real Appeal®



3.7%

body weight lost by those who attended at least four sessions



\$771 less

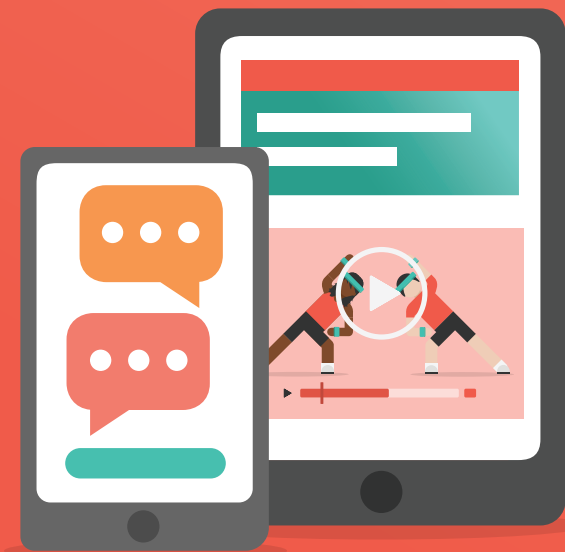
medical expenditures, on average, per employee who completed the program



2.3:1 ROI

with medical cost savings more than double program costs

“Digital tools allow employees to make the program work around their lifestyle and schedule.”



How Employers Can Help

Tailor Outreach

Double down on efforts to reach employees of at-risk populations. Black adults have the highest age-adjusted rates of obesity, followed by Hispanic adults, according to the CDC. When looking at age groups, people between 40 and 59 have the highest rates of obesity.

Have an Ongoing Conversation

Make healthy eating an ongoing conversation, whether that means creating a recipe channel on the company Slack platform, hosting healthy cooking competitions, including nutrition tips in wellness communications, or regularly surveying employees on what healthy options they'd like at company events.

Promote Healthier Options

Share clear guidelines with managers and any catering staff for offering healthier options at meetings and events, the CDC recommends. For at-home employees, consider sending healthy meal kits or nutritious snack options.

Share Resources

Send employees actionable articles, such as...

- [6 Sneaky Signs You Might Be Eating Too Much Salt](#)
- [30 Clean Snacks That Are 150 Calories or Fewer](#)
- [10 Ways to Work Out Without Going Anywhere](#)

Embrace Digital

Promote clinically validated digital weight loss programs that pair science-backed education with coaching accountability and personalization. Remind employees that digital tools allow them to make the program work around their lifestyle and schedule.

Cue Employee Movement

Encourage employees to view their breaks and commutes as movement opportunities, by supplying bike racks, maps of nearby walking routes, or short video sessions for yoga or calisthenics. Only about one in five employers have environmental supports for physical activity, but providing them can make a difference.

Encourage an Active Culture

Make movement part of the company culture, whether that means hosting fitness challenges, encouraging walking meetings, or allowing flex time for physical activity.



Putting Cardiac Health at the Heart of Your Post-Pandemic Plan

No doubt, employers face a multitude of priorities when crafting wellness strategies. But addressing the heart-health crisis wrought by the pandemic can not only save lives (and serious expense) but also create holistic health improvements. By prioritizing heart health, you can help employees achieve better sleep, stronger stress management, and a healthier lifestyle.

There will always be a place for in-person and traditional care channels. But digital health offerings can take your workplace programs so much further, by delivering convenient, scalable, smarter solutions. And coaching can amplify that impact even more, through greater personalization and accountability that seeds maximum engagement and follow-through.

Here's what to look for in a digital health partner that can help you effectively navigate the high-stakes terrain of employee heart health:

- ✔ **Comprehensive program design** that supports health and well-being across the care continuum, from prevention to condition management
- ✔ **Strong track record** of user engagement
- ✔ **Proven impact** across a variety of metrics, such as health outcomes, satisfaction, ROI, and reduction in medical costs
- ✔ **Tailored options** for employee learning and engagement preferences, such as self-paced learning or one-on-one support
- ✔ **Prioritizes health equity** with specific programs or strategies aimed at engaging vulnerable and marginalized employee populations
- ✔ **High satisfaction** from employers and employee program users
- ✔ **Scalable and inclusive program** that can address a wide range of employee demographics and health needs
- ✔ **Supports self-management** of heart disease and related conditions with education, tools, and coaching



At Rally Health, we use technology to make health care and staying healthy more accessible and affordable for all, regardless of health plan. We create digital solutions and experiences for all of the health care system's participants: employers, health plans, providers, and consumers.

In addition to building our own experiences, we also partner with health programs and services providers to power their digital engagement, creating a unique partnership of clinical expertise with consumer-friendly digital experiences.

What makes Rally unique is that we combine a user-first design approach with unparalleled health care system access to make something as complicated as managing your health as easy to use as your smartphone.



Email rallysales@rallyhealth.com to learn how Rally can help you achieve your company's heart health goals.