

The Daily News

UPMC's health fair focuses on back pain

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At some point in their lives, an estimated 80 percent of Americans will experience back pain - one of the most common and most expensive causes of work-related disability in the United States.

To help reduce the incidence of low-back injuries on the job, UPMC Health Plan unveiled its plan to increase awareness of the problem during a day-long health fair Wednesday at UPMC McKeesport.

More than 300 nurses, nursing assistants, patient care technicians, licensed practical nurses and clinical caseworkers at the hospital will take part in the pilot program "We've Got Your Back," part of the health plan's UPMC MyHealth.

So far, 30 facilitators - all unit directors in nursing - have been trained in the proper way to lift. Cheryl Como, director of nursing at UPMC McKeesport, said all direct-care providers will go through the program to "learn how to use their backs when bending down and lifting. We are in the business of protecting the health of our employees and this is one way of doing that."

Training is scheduled to begin Feb. 6 in the Winter Institute for Simulation and Educational Research center at the hospital. They will take part in a three-hour hands-on session to learn the 10-step protocol for proper lifting.

The program also involves physical fitness and core muscle strength assessment. Participants will be encouraged to talk with a health coach on how to improve their health. Care management services will be offered for those with more serious back problems.

"We've Got Your Back" is provided through a partnership with UPMC Health Plan, UPMC's Centers for Rehab Services, the WISER center and EAP Solutions.

David Weir, president of UPMC Work Partners, said UPMC McKeesport was chosen as the pilot program because it is one of the older hospitals in the UPMC system.

"We wanted to start the program then eventually offer it throughout the entire health system" he said.

The idea of “We’ve Got Your Back,” he said, is to “take the training out of the occupational therapy setting and focus on the whole body and how it impacts their daily life.”

During the health fair, hospital employees had a chance to take advantage of BodyMap, new technology that identifies core muscle weaknesses that could be a precursor to low back problems. Digital images are taken in front of a grid-like backdrop and digital photos are taken while the “patient” is performing several different squatting maneuvers. A computer program creates an individualized exercise program based on the findings to help develop core strength.

Other informational tables provided information on carbon monoxide testing to determine the amount in your lungs, the hospital’s soon-to-be-open Wister simulation center, ways of dealing with stress, nutrition information, and physical fitness and the use of stability balls while exercising.

To encourage folks to add more physical activity to their daily routine, two walk-team leaders with Leslie Sansone In-Home Walking Program led employees on a two-mile walk, complete with warm-up and cool down.

The highlight of the festivities was a visit by Steeler safety and former McKeesport Area High School football star Mike Logan. He and Marcel Pastoor, assistant strength coordinator coach for the Steelers, shared the importance of having strong core muscles.

“Troy (Polamalu) only uses the bands and balls when he’s in the weight room,” Logan said. “He focuses on the core muscles and you can see how well that allows him to perform. The core is very important for all you do, not just while on the job but in your daily life.”

He told employees that the bending and lifting they do every day requires them to have a strong core section.

“You are always bending over and picking things up,” he pointed out. “So it really comes into play every day in your job.”

Referring to injuries in recent seasons, Logan said when he arrived at training camp last year, “I was in the best shape of my life. When I wasn’t able to run because of my injuries, I worked every day on upper body core exercises. When I got to camp, my 10th one, I was 31 years old but I caught the coaches’ attention because of what I was able to do on the field. It was because of the core exercises I had done.”

Pastoor said the team sets aside 20 minutes of workout time to focus solely on core exercises.

“The core has to be strong for them to stay healthy,” he said.

Logan, Pastoor and Brian Hagen, director of sports medicine at the UPMC Sports Medicine Center, used volunteers to demonstrate some exercises the employees can do with the bands and ball to strengthen their core.

“This core group of exercises can help reduce low-back injuries and increase your fitness level,” Hagen said. “These few simple exercises can make an impact not just at work but in your life at home, too.”

Weir shared his sentiments.

“It’s the things you do today that will help you down the road,” he said. “You are an industrial athlete. Take the time to get your core strengthened because this is all about you so you can lead a healthy and productive lifestyle.”