



# HEALTH INSURANCE WELLNESS PROGRAMS

What's in it for you and how they  
affect your insurance premiums

# Introduction

The Canadian approach to health care needs to change. Canadians generally have a reactive rather than proactive approach to their health, and this has led to very few improvements in the overall health of the population.

A fundamental shift in how Canadians approach health care is necessary to create healthy citizens in the future. We need to move toward preventing illness and disease instead of treating it when it strikes.

More Canadians are becoming open to trying alternative forms of medical treatments and approaches, including the use of health and wellness programs offered through personal health insurance plans.

Health insurance wellness programs can play a vital role in changing how Canadians approach health care. Without the use of such programs, Canadians may be exposing themselves to the risks associated with contracting preventable conditions and diseases, such as diabetes, heart disease and obesity.

The following examines the current state of Canadian health, outlines the shortcomings and discusses the importance of adopting a proactive approach to health care through health insurance wellness programs.



# CURRENT STATE OF CANADIAN HEALTH



With an aging population, the continually increasing costs of prescription drugs, and the burden of increasing health care costs that Canadians must pay out of pocket, there is a need to fundamentally shift our approach to health care. As life spans increase, people will inevitably require increasingly expensive medical care and medications over a longer period of time, which will place more stress on the health care system.

Failing to address this situation now will cost Canadians more money and potentially have a negative impact on the quality of care to which they will have access in their province.

Health trends suggest that when it comes to many key health conditions, Canadians are becoming less healthy. Looking at Canadians' well-being, health conditions and health behaviours from 2003 to 2013, very little has changed:<sup>1</sup>

#### Overall well-being:

- Perceived health, fair or poor, decreased from 10.6% to 9.7%
- Perceived mental health, fair or poor, increased from 4.5% to 6.1%
- Perceived life stress decreased from 24.1% to 23.3%
- Sense of community belonging increased from 63.2% to 65.2%

#### Health conditions:

- Overweight increased from 33.2% to 33.6%
- Obesity increased from 14.9% to 18.2%
- Diabetes increased from 4.2% to 5.3%
- High blood pressure increased from 13% to 14.1%
- Mood disorders increased from 5.1% to 7.5%
- Pain or discomfort that prevents activities increased from 10% to 13.2%
- Cancer incidence (per 100,000 population) increased from 397.5 in 2003 to 405.2 in 2007 (more recent data not provided)

There are some positives. Fewer people are smoking (decrease from 23.4% to 19.6%), more people are active or moderately active (increase from 52.3% to 56.3%), more people have access to influenza immunization (increase from 26.1% to 26.6%) and more people are satisfied or very satisfied with their lives (increase from 91.4% to 92.4%). However, this is not enough.

Clearly, our approach to health care and our lifestyles need to change if we want to improve the health of Canadians and the health care system in the country. Health conditions are worsening, and there are only minor areas of improvement. Without a change in their approach toward health and wellness, Canadians will continue to be at risk of developing preventable health conditions.

### WHAT'S THE RISK?

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), heart disease, stroke, cancer, chronic respiratory diseases and diabetes are the leading cause of mortality in the world, representing 60% of all deaths. WHO predicted that unless action was taken to address the causes of death from these chronic diseases, their incidence would increase by 17% between 2005 and 2015.<sup>2</sup>



## THE REALITY OF CANADIAN HEALTH CARE – A NEED FOR A SHIFT IN APPROACH

Canadians have always taken pride in having access to world-class health care, and health care has remained a top priority for decades. According to a 2012 survey, 90% of Canadians believe that “health care should be the main priority for national decision-makers, ahead of other important issues such as the economy and the environment.”<sup>3</sup>

However, a Summit on Sustainable Health and Health Care in 2012<sup>4</sup> found that the health care system needs to be transformed and updated to meet the current health needs of Canadians.

Here are some of the key issues identified:

- The health care system is locked into a dated model
- The health care system does not meet the needs of an aging population
- The society must take a broad approach to improving health
- Individuals must be responsible for the quality of their own lives

The Summit identified that there is an increasing need to focus on proactive care and wellness to improve the state of health of Canadians. “A healthy population should be our goal. A healthy population will demand fewer acute care services caused by preventable chronic diseases. We need a system focused on ‘wellness’ as well as ‘health care.’ Employers, community organizations, and families have important roles to play in supporting individual wellness.”

The need for a shift in approach to health care is echoed in a 2013 study<sup>5</sup> by the School of Public Policy at the University of Calgary. The study evaluated the costs and benefits of an alternative approach to health care by looking at the preventive

health care program run by Pure North S'Energy Foundation, a not-for-profit organization that pays for and provides personalized, preventative health care services.

One of the key findings of the study was that a Canadian in poor health requires about \$10,000 per year more in health care costs than someone in good health.

"People in poor health tend to use more healthcare," said Herb Emery, lead author of the report. "The minority of the population, 20 per cent, is generating 80 per cent of the costs, and these are generally people who are in poor health."

"What we're really talking about is chronic conditions... diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer. If we can intervene sooner, we can change lifestyles, we can change health."



## FROM REACTIVE TO PROACTIVE HEALTH CARE AND WELLNESS

Making the right decisions about your health can sometimes be difficult. There is a lot of information out there, and it can be tough to figure out the best approach to take. Every person has unique health care needs, and sometimes those needs require more personalized attention, support and consultation.

A refined focus on health and wellness will help to promote healthy living and reduce or prevent chronic illnesses. WHO found that reducing unhealthy behaviours such as poor eating habits, lack of activity and smoking can decrease instances of chronic disease. Studies have found that reduced risks associated with these unhealthy habits can reduce the risk of cancer by 40% and the risk of diabetes, stroke and heart disease by 80%.<sup>6</sup>

Helping Canadians recognize the importance of proactive health and wellness programs starts with improving overall health literacy. According to the Canadian Council of Learning (CCL), 60% of Canadian adults do not have the skills to manage their health appropriately.<sup>7</sup>

The CCL also found that "Canadians with the lowest health-literacy skills are 2.5 times more likely to report being in fair or poor health as those with the highest skill levels."<sup>8</sup> This strong link between literacy and health shows that health education and greater access to health resources need to be part of the new approach to health management for Canadians.

Increased access to health care is only part of the solution. In addition to having access to new medical treatments and alternative health care options, Canadians need to improve their lifestyles.

Purchasing private health insurance coverage is an effective way to help offset the medical costs that are not covered by provincial health care plans. However, health insurance wellness programs take private health care to the next level by offering members additional health care services and resources that would otherwise be difficult to obtain.

Traditionally only offered through group insurance and employee benefit plans, some leading health insurance companies are now offering health insurance wellness programs to enhance their health insurance coverage plans and to help

individuals make sound decisions about their health and health care options. These programs are forward-thinking and take a proactive approach to health care.



## HEALTH INSURANCE WELLNESS PROGRAMS – A PROACTIVE APPROACH

Corporate wellness programs are increasingly being offered by Canadian companies as a means of creating a happy and healthy workforce. These programs are known to improve employee health, help prevent injuries, reduce human error, increase performance and lead to a better overall organizational culture.<sup>9</sup>

“Statistics have routinely shown that employers who utilize corporate wellness programs have decreased absenteeism, reduced health care expenses and increased productivity among employees.”<sup>10</sup>

According to Wellness Proposals,<sup>11</sup> there are now more than 200 scientific studies that have concluded that corporate wellness programs have a positive return on investment. Both the companies that implement these programs and the individuals who use the resources benefit.

Effective wellness programs also help to reduce stress, something that can impact work and personal relationships, and the ability to sleep. It can also have many negative impacts on health.

Natural Healthcare Canada<sup>12</sup> states that an Ipsos-Reid study found the following are preventable contributors to employee absenteeism:

- Depression/anxiety/other mental health disorders (66%)
- Stress (60%)
- Addictions or substance use/abuse issues (20%)
- Eldercare issues (19%)

“Taking advantage of programs offered not only will help you succeed more during work hours, it will give you more energy and patience for your home and personal life as well,” as stated by Natural Healthcare Canada.<sup>13</sup>

The benefits of wellness programs, regardless of how they are provided, include:

- Weight loss
- Increased activity and improved physical fitness
- Decreased rates of injury and illness
- Better stress management
- Increased overall well-being

But what if you don't have access to a corporate wellness program through your employer?

Canadians without access to wellness programs through an employer can still benefit from similar programs through leading health insurance companies that are taking a more proactive approach to health care and health insurance plans.

The goal of health insurance wellness programs is to help individuals improve their overall quality of life. Whether you are living with a chronic illness, require additional medical attention, need information, or are completely healthy, these programs can provide you with the resources you need to strengthen your physical and mental well-being. Such programs can also provide you with access to resources and information you need to make informed decisions about your health – allowing you to make lifestyle changes with long-term health benefits.

To support members with personal health insurance coverage, the programs provide access to a team of experienced health care professionals who can help with referrals, personal care, consulting, resources and health advice for improving the quality of your life.



## FEATURES OF HEALTH INSURANCE WELLNESS PROGRAMS

The wellness programs offered by private insurance companies go beyond standard health insurance coverage for vision and dental care, prescription drugs, and hospital stays. They provide individual health plan subscribers with various consulting services, support programs and educational resources to help them stay healthy.

Here are some of the perks that are included in wellness programs as part of personal health insurance coverage:

### 1. Consulting services

The consulting services offered through health and wellness programs are designed to make things easier for you. Whether you have a health concern, a scheduled surgery coming up that requires a hospital stay, or just need more information, you can get a referral to a health professional who can answer your questions and provide you with the advice you are looking for.

Consulting services can help you use the Ontario health care system more effectively. You can get:

- personalized health information
- help with finding local clinics
- help finding health care services
- any guidance you need to stay healthy

## 2. Support services

Part of managing a health condition and recovering from surgery or a hospital stay includes support services to help you get back to everyday life as quickly and effectively as possible. Wellness programs offer support services to help you coordinate home care services, nursing care, domestic assistance, medication delivery, remote monitoring and even tutoring services for students.

## 3. Information and resources

Part of living a healthy lifestyle is taking a proactive approach to your health. The more you know and the more access you have to health and wellness information, the more likely you are to avoid health issues and disease. Wellness programs offer accessible health information – practical services and resources available in your area to help you do things like manage stress, make better diet choices or even kick a bad habit. You can also receive a health newsletter about various relevant health issues and medical conditions.

## 4. Health insurance wellness discounts

A final and attractive feature of wellness programs are the discounts, special offers and savings. Even with personal health insurance coverage, it can still be difficult to pay for many health care products and services. Prices vary and can exceed the coverage included in your health benefits plan.

You can save through special offers and wellness discounts from participating companies for:

- dental care
- fitness
- hearing aids and equipment
- medical equipment and supplies
- vision care
- pharmacy services
- nursing services
- home care
- and many other health and wellness services

These discounts and special offers help to offset medical and health-related costs that are outside the scope of provincial and private health insurance coverage. The programs provide savings at the point of sale at many participating service providers across Ontario, regardless of whether the product or service is covered under your benefits plan.





# BENEFITS OF INSURER HEALTH AND WELLNESS PROGRAMS

The additional features offered as part of health insurance wellness programs benefit you in these key ways:

## 1. Greater access to health care resources

Wellness programs provide members of personal health care insurance plans with greater access to health care resources and information. This enables people to take a more proactive approach to health care, explore alternative care options, and helps them improve their overall health and well-being. People with access to the right information and support are in a better position to make smart and well-informed decisions about their health and lifestyle choices.

## 2. A more health-conscious society

Every individual with access to additional health care resources and information, and who uses these to make better-informed health care decisions, helps to create a healthier and more health-conscious society. The support through wellness programs helps people raise health-conscious families, and this leads to a more productive and proactive society. Happy and healthy people place less strain on the health care system.

## 3. Lower insurance premiums

The healthier people are, the lower insurance premiums will become. If you are healthy and make fewer claims, insurance companies have a healthy pool of insured members and can maintain level insurance premiums. You will also save money on the cost of medical care and supplies that are not covered by OHIP or private health care plans.

# Conclusion

Without greater access to wellness programs and proactive health care practices, Canadians will continue to be at risk for common preventable diseases. It's clear by the statistics that our current reactive approach to health care has done very little to improve our health as a society.

Collectively, we need to change our mindset and approach. Taking a proactive approach can help many Canadians avoid getting common preventable diseases.

Health insurance wellness programs are an essential part of maintaining our health today and in the future. Health insurance wellness programs add a new element to personal health insurance. The leading health insurance companies that offer these programs allow individuals to take a more holistic approach to caring for themselves and their families. A proactive approach to health care helps create healthier people and a healthier society.

All Blue Cross health plans include access to the exclusive **Blue Cross Member Assistance program** and its services. Part of this program includes the national Blue Advantage discounts program, which provides savings for medical care, vision care, fitness clubs and more. For more information, visit the **Blue Advantage website**.





<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada. 2014. *Health Trends*. Statistics Canada Catalogue No. 82-213-XWE. Ottawa. Released June 12, 2014. <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/health-sante/82-213/index.cfm?Lang=ENG> (accessed March 27, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization. *Chronic diseases are the major cause of death and disability worldwide*. [http://www.who.int/chp/chronic\\_disease\\_report/media/Factsheet1.pdf?ua=1](http://www.who.int/chp/chronic_disease_report/media/Factsheet1.pdf?ua=1) (accessed April 1, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Muzyka, Glen Hodgson and Gabriela Prada. The Conference Board of Canada. *The Inconvenient Truths About Canadian Health Care*. [http://www.conferenceboard.ca/cashc/research/2012/inconvenient\\_truths.aspx](http://www.conferenceboard.ca/cashc/research/2012/inconvenient_truths.aspx) (accessed April 1, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Bill Graveland. Focusing preventative programs on those in poor health could save billions: study. *The Globe and Mail*, January 19, 2013. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/focusing-preventative-programs-on-those-in-poor-health-could-save-billions-study/article12689203/> (accessed April 1, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> World Health Organization. (2005). *Preventing chronic diseases: A vital investment*. [http://www.who.int/chp/chronic\\_disease\\_report/en/](http://www.who.int/chp/chronic_disease_report/en/) (accessed April 1, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Canadian Council on Learning. (2008). *Health Literacy in Canada: A Healthy Understanding*. <http://www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/Reports/HealthLiteracy.html> (accessed April 1, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Canadian Council on Learning. (2008). *Health Literacy in Canada: A Healthy Understanding*. Fact Sheet. <http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/HealthLiteracy/HealthLiteracyFactSheetFeb2008E.pdf> (accessed April 1, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Natural Healthcare Canada. Benefits of Implementing a Workplace Wellness Program. [http://naturalhealthcare.ca/benefits\\_of\\_a\\_wellness\\_program.phtml](http://naturalhealthcare.ca/benefits_of_a_wellness_program.phtml) (accessed April 1, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Andy Goldstein. Wellness Programs Benefit Employees and Companies. National Association of State Boards of Accountancy, 11 January 2012. <http://nasba.org/features/wellness-programs-benefit-employees-and-companies/> (accessed April 1, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Wellness Proposals. Benefits of Worksite Benefits Programs. <http://wellnessproposals.com/guide-to-worksite-wellness-programs/benefits-of-worksite-wellness-programs/> (accessed April 1, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Natural Healthcare Canada. Benefits of Implementing a Workplace Wellness Program.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.