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Medical Mutual President and Chief Executive Rick Chiricosta wants to lose 15 pounds and recently asked his 2,700 employees to join him in a weight-loss challenge.



MARVIN FONG | THE PLAIN DEALER

Fitness plan pays for slimming down

SARAH JANE TRIBBLE
Plain Dealer Reporter

Rick Chiricosta, Medical Mutual of Ohio president and chief executive, doesn't look like a guy who needs to lose weight.

The tall and seemingly trim former tennis star is still active in the sport and moves quickly when walking up and down the halls of his Cleveland health insurance company's downtown headquarters.

But, apparently, Chiricosta needs to lose 15 pounds. And he

wants help from his employees.

"I notice that 15 pounds when I'm trying to move on the tennis court," Chiricosta said days after starting a company-wide weight-loss contest in early January.

More than 1,500 of Medical Mutual's 2,700 workers have signed on for the competition, which pits workers against each other to see who can lose the highest percentage of body weight before July 1. The first-place winner gets \$2,500; second place, \$1,000; and third, \$750.

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The contest is indicative of a growing trend among Northeast Ohio employers as they search for ways to help their work force get healthier and, in the end, reduce their own cost of providing medical coverage, said Mark Alder, president of benefits consulting firm Herbruck Alder.

"If people could enjoy better health, that would result in better claims," Alder said. "Wellness is kind of that last area where personal responsibility needs to come in, and employers are crazy if they don't try to encourage employees to take better care of themselves."

Offering a contest with a cash prize is "very shrewd," Alder said. The more creative the wellness program is, the more people participate, he added.

Herbruck Alder found in a recent survey that 23 percent of 164 large and small Northern Ohio employers said they have

comprehensive wellness programs — that's up 39 percent over the year before.

In addition, another 17 percent of companies said they were developing such programs. These programs typically include smoking cessation, weight-control and weight-loss services, and on-site food services.

Most of the companies that have started programs are doing so to save on health-care costs but also have found that the programs enhanced employee goodwill and reduced absences, according to the survey.

Back at Medical Mutual, Chiricosta is writing a blog to help track his progress and has committed to writing personal anecdotes at least once a week. Only employees can follow him online, however.

A recent entry began this way:

Last night I left the office about 6:15 and with the horrible weather and bad roads asked myself on the way home "How bad do I really want to workout?"

I knew it would mean not getting home until after 8:00 once I changed, worked out and

showered but I decided not to get out of the habit.

The high-powered executive ends up sounding like any Average Joe. One employee posted a response, saying "my entire body hurts and, like Rick, I don't see any pounds off yet but I know it's coming because I FEEL great."

Medical Mutual has tried over the years to reduce the kind of risk factors among its employees that drive up employer health-care costs. The insurer has largely succeeded in areas such as smoking and stress but has failed in reducing obesity and hypertension among its workers, Chiricosta said.

According to the company's research, medical expenses for obese employees are estimated to be between 29 percent and 117 percent greater than medical expenses for employees with a healthy weight. Needless to say, Chiricosta hopes the down-to-earth blog will provide inspiration.

"I want to share the successes with them as well as when I'm not doing well," he said.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter: stribble@plained.com, 216-999-4255