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Vacation for Your Health, And Your Job Productivity

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By Kristen Gerencher

A vacation may seem like a frivolous thing to contemplate in the face of a slowing economy, high food and gas prices, job insecurities and a falling dollar. But your continued health and productivity may depend upon your getting away from work periodically, and employers grappling with rapidly rising health-care costs are starting to embrace the idea as well, public-health experts and benefits consultants say.

"There definitely is a trend towards employers understanding the relationship between stress and health, and that taking time to recharge, relax, does have a benefit to burnout," said Carol Sladek, principal in the work/life consulting practice of Hewitt Associates in Lincolnshire, Ill. "We do see some of our clients moving in the direction of trying to encourage their employees to use their time off and use it in larger increments."

That may be a tough sell this year, even though workers asked to do more with fewer resources may need their vacation time more than ever. Fearful of appearing unneeded or uncommitted, employees may be more inclined to schedule a few long weekends or limit their vacations to no more than a week. The portion of Americans planning to take a vacation this year dropped to 33% from 40% who said they took one last year, according to a survey of 1,000 adults released earlier this month from travel-insurance provider Access America.

On the spectrum of U.S. workers' efforts to secure paid time off, vacation historically has taken a backseat to sick days and leave for medical reasons and family caregiving. But it's rising as a benefit that Americans want to protect, said John de Graaf, executive director of Take Back Your Time, a Seattle-based nonprofit that addresses overwork and time poverty.

"We feel vacation time or the lack of it affects many Americans, and in many ways has a negative impact on our health," he said, noting that the U.S. spends 16% of its gross domestic product on health care but fares relatively poorly in international comparisons of life expectancy, infant mortality, chronic illness and obesity.

There is little research on whether taking vacations affects personal health, and how the duration and kind of respite may factor in. The frequency of annual vacations was associated with a reduced risk of death in middle-aged men at high risk of heart disease, according to a study published in the journal *Psychosomatic Medicine* in 2000. A 2005 study of 1,500 women aged 25 to 75 published in the *Wisconsin Medical Journal* suggests that failing to take a break at least once a year brings psychological health risks.

The majority of the women studied, 34%, reported taking a vacation once a year, while 23% said they took one twice a year. Another 23% reported getting away every two to five years. Almost one in five, 19%, said they only took a vacation once every six years or less often.

The risk of depression, as measured by a standard industry test, increased as the frequency of vacation-taking declined, said Cathy McCarty, senior research scientist at the Marshfield Clinic in Marshfield, Wis.

Last year, about 84% of U.S. employers offered paid vacation, and 63% rolled sick, vacation and personal days into a single paid-time-off plan, according to the most recent research from the Society for Human Resource Management in Alexandria, Va. Even those with generous time off don't always take it. Only 14% of U.S. employees take a vacation of at least two weeks, according to a 2004 study from the Families and Work Institute in New York.

Paid vacation time is a wellness issue that's as important as careful eating and regular exercise for workers' health, said Joe Robinson, a work/life balance consultant and author of "Work to Live" in Santa Monica, Calif.

"To be healthy and do a sustainable job in a 24/7 world, you've got to have a richer component to your life" than just working all the time, Mr. Robinson said. "You've got to understand the role that input plays in your output."

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