

Corporate wellness: Eating well in hybrid work times

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Two years have passed since corporate employees around the world made a sudden mass exodus from their workplaces. Today, there is a widespread return - some are back to a full 5-day week in the office, while others are implementing hybrid regimes. What everyone finds is that the culture, feel and rhythm of corporate life have been irrevocably changed.



The global pandemic acutely sharpened our focus on health and safety, and both employers and employees are bringing this heightened awareness into the workplace. The extended period of working from home enabled us to manage our health concerns and general wellness in our own time, in our ways during the working week. Many people reported an improved work-life balance, as well as getting more physical exercise and finding it easier to eat healthily. These were cherished gains during extraordinarily challenging times – and we don't want to lose them now that we're transitioning from the work-from-home mode.

With corporate wellness in the spotlight during July, it's a good opportunity for these company programmes to be reinvigorated with the burgeoning return to the office. Typically, corporate wellness programmes focus on providing health promotion and education, basic health assessments and mental health support. However, due to the sedentary nature of office work and the large number of meals people eat at the office, these wellness programmes need to also incorporate opportunities for daily physical activity and healthy nutrition.

Nelile Nxumalo, a registered dietitian and spokesperson for [Adsa \(The Association for Dietetics in South Africa\)](#) outlines the basics of what corporate wellness programmes can provide to enable employees to focus on healthy eating choices. She says: "Employees need to have lunch and tea breaks, and places where they can sit and eat with their colleagues, away from their desks. This avoids a rushed meal that could potentially lead to unhealthy eating habits such as skipping meals but over-consuming calories as you're always snacking instead of eating a nutritious meal."

Nelile advises:

- Canteen menus should offer healthy meal options incorporating salads, vegetables, fruits, lean proteins, whole grains and high fibre or unrefined carbohydrates. Calorie dense meals including highly processed foods and unrefined

carbohydrates should be avoided.

- Vending machines or tuck shops should offer healthy snack options such as homemade popcorn, unsalted nuts, raisins, dried fruits, lean biltong and crackers as well as veggie crudités and a variety of dips like hummus and tzatziki, instead of chocolates, sweets and crisps only.
- Facilities should be available for staff to store meals or lunchboxes at appropriate temperatures to prevent spoiling.
- The corporate wellness programme can advocate for bringing healthy meals from home to work to avoid buying take-away meals. To support employees, it would help to provide microwaves or other kitchen equipment to warm up food. Home cooked meals often have fewer calories and are more nutrient-dense than take-away or convenience foods.

Registered dietitian, Raeesa Seedat, recommends that corporate wellness programmes include nutrition education in their promotion of healthy lifestyles for their employees. She says: “Research suggests that when employees begin a wellness programme with a positive intention at the outset, they are more likely to sustain lifestyle behaviours such as healthy eating, physical activity and stress management. Regular training using relevant and validated tools can empower employees to make better choices for their health, and optimise outcomes. Ideally, a dietitian should be consulted with regards to the composition of meals served at the staff cafeteria and give input on portion control. Catering for corporate events and meetings should also be focused on healthy eating principles.”

No matter what your company provides through its wellness programme, healthy eating during workdays, in the end, is about the food choices you make each day. Registered dietitian, Jandri Barnard, says: “It’s important to avoid the pitfall of just grabbing something quick to eat for a rushed workday lunch, because all too often that’s likely to be highly processed or fast foods that are calorie dense but nutrient poor. With planning and just a bit of time to shop and some preparation, you can set up an entire working week of healthy meals and snacks. Don’t focus only on foods though, because what you drink during the working day counts too. Make a habit of leaving home with a water bottle – you can always add mint, cucumber or lemon for flavour. Limit your caffeine intake by choosing rooibos, fruit and herbal teas when you want a warm drink. Avoid energy drinks and sugary soft drinks.”

Jandri’s top tips for planning, shopping and preparing workday lunches and snacks:

- Planning, planning, planning! Plan meals for the week before going shopping and shop only for the ingredients you need
- You can consider making an extra portion of your evening meal as a leftover for your work lunch the following day. Remember to keep pre-prepared meals at appropriate temperatures to prevent spoilage
- Dishes that are cooked the evening before, such as breakfast porridge, soups, grain and lentil salads, pasta salads or leftover meals need to be cooled down properly and packaged in containers that can be reheated again, if necessary
- Pre-prepare lunches, and even breakfasts, beforehand on the weekends or in the evenings
- Smoothies can be prepared in the mornings before work but get the ingredients ready the evening before
- Pre-pack snacks such as wholewheat crackers, bran muffins, unsalted nuts, seeds, lean biltong and dried fruit to pop into your bag for work
- Vegetable crudités or fresh fruit slices can also form part of your work snack box
- Keep water bottles filled and have extra herbal or fruit tea bags ready for your workday
- Sandwiches and wraps can be prepared in the mornings – or the evenings before if you have time constraints in the morning – but rather pack fresh produce such as tomatoes and cucumbers separately and add these later, as they can make the bread or wrap soggy and unappetising
- Use wholewheat or low GI bread, rolls or wraps rather than refined white flour products which will result in you being hungrier sooner in the day
- Remember that avocado turns brown due to the oxidation process when it is exposed to oxygen. To prevent this, add a sprinkle of olive oil or squeeze some lemon juice over your sliced or mashed avocado. Then you still have green avocado to add to your salad or sandwich at lunchtime.

Three dietitian approved, easy recipes that are ideas for workday meals/snacks:

[Peanut butter spice granola/bar](#)

As a bar, this is a spicy, fibre-rich on-the-go snack to enjoy while commuting, or between meetings. The granola version can be combined with yoghurt or drinking yoghurt for a workday breakfast or lunchbox alternative. This snack or meal has a lower glycaemic index to prevent blood sugar spikes and feeling an afternoon slump.

[Black forest smoothie bowl](#)

An antioxidant morning booster, which can be used as a vegan or dairy-free breakfast option if the cottage cheese is excluded. It is fibre rich with oats and chia seeds to reduce your risk of developing heart disease.

[Moroccan spiced lentil salad with dried apricots and almond flakes](#)

An easy, nutritious salad to pre-prepare for work or have as a load shedding meal after work. This tasty salad is packed with vitamins, low fat protein and fibre with dried fruit, nuts and spices for extra zing and comfort.

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