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Local News

Taking the right steps

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Hanson Mold workers Andy Green and Laura Smith walk around the plant during the lunch hour Thursday as part of a company-sponsored walk-for-health program. John Madill / H-P staff

Hanson companies sign on with Walking spree to encourage fitness

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ST. JOSEPH - While some politicians are just talking the talk about reducing health care costs, Hanson Mold and its sister companies are walking the walk by encouraging healthier living among employees.

Last year, the St. Joseph company, along with Hanson Logistics, signed on with Walkingspree, which offers pedometers that hook into its website to track an individual's activity level.

"They're all gung-ho about it," said Jim Todd, Hanson Mold's human resources director and one of the 55 out of 90 employees (along with 27 spouses) at the Hollywood Road location who are taking part in the program.

Hanson Logistics has 191 participants, including 74 percent of its employees, according to Melissa Price, a

receptionist at the company's St. Joseph office.

The Hanson companies' employee insurance is self-funded, so there is a vested interest in keeping down health care costs, Todd said.

A year and a half ago, executives began looking at different wellness programs, searching for one that was ongoing, fun and something that most employees could take part in.

They found that when companies pay for gym memberships or exercise equipment, participation starts out strong but soon fizzles out, Todd said.

Walkingspree offered a low-impact but highly effective exercise plan, with incentives including online monitoring, contests and prizes.

Right now teams of Hanson Mold employees are in a 1,200-mile virtual race around Lake Michigan, based on their collective steps. Others are taking part in a Mayan Adventure with companies from around the world. (As of this week Hanson Mold was in the lead, with Hanson Logistics in second place.)

Donated prizes, including gift cards and a Kindle Fire, act as incentives for top walkers.

Researchers have found that walking a total of 30 minutes a day reduces the risk of everything from heart disease and diabetes to dementia, according to AARP.

Walkingspree encourages participants to walk between 6,000 and 10,000 steps a day, measured by the pedometer they wear all day. It also counts aerobic steps, those accumulated for at least 10 minutes without stopping.

Each participant has their own page on the website that tracks their steps. A color-coded calendar shows if the walker has met or exceeded the daily 6,000-step goal.

The website also offers a food tracker, which lists the calories, fat and sodium in meals and restaurant offerings, and measures Body Mass Index.

Todd (whose online name is Mr. Coolaid) has been averaging 10,000 steps a day and has walked 119 miles since Jan. 1.

"My wife is ecstatic," Todd said.

He's had a treadmill for about nine years and had probably used it 12 times before Walkingspree.

"Now I can't go home without setting aside an hour to hit the treadmill," the 61-year-old said. He has lost weight and has more energy.

Hanson Mold's top walker is receptionist Phyllis Livengood, 50, of St. Joseph.

Since Jan. 1 she has logged more than 1 million steps, for a total of 422 miles. She averages 39,500 steps a day by walking two to three hours.

Livengood (whose online name is On the Go) grew up on a farm and was accustomed to being physically active. She was already an avid walker before Walkingspree came along.

She wasn't sure at first whether she would sign up, but decided it would be fun.

Livengood, who walks on a treadmill and also takes part in aerobic exercise, yoga and Pilates, encourages others to get moving.

"It's hard to get motivated, but you feel so good when you do, you'll be glad you did," she said. "If I don't do this, I miss it."

Melissa Price, 31, of Watervliet, is averaging 8,000 steps a day and has lost 15 pounds in three months. Most of Hanson Logistics' employees are averaging between 10,000 and 15,000 steps a day, she said.

Health experts warn that sitting too long has its own hazards, including an increased risk of cancer and heart

disease.

Tom Reule, 62, Hanson Mold's vice president and director of engineering, said the Walkingspree program has encouraged him and his colleagues to get out of their chairs during the workday.

The pedometers are a big incentive, Reule said. He also won a \$500 drawing from Walkingspree for being a top walker.

Signing up with Walkingspree is "not cheap," Todd said.

Hanson Mold bought 90 pedometers from Walkingspree at \$100 each, and it cost another \$1,000 to set up the company's website page.

The company took a health assessment of its employees before they started and will take another in September to determine their progress.

Todd expects the expense to pay off in the long run.

"If we save one major medical claim, it will pay for itself," Todd said.

The challenge will be to continue to motivate employees, he said. The company is considering starting a walking buddies program for the spring and setting up a competition between Hanson Mold and Hanson Logistics.

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