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Work to be done? Wellness assessments check it out

Mercy, new biotech firm test for risk factors

Business Courier of Cincinnati - by [Jon Newberry](#) Staff Reporter

In some fields, it might be true that “what you don’t know can’t hurt you,” but not when it comes to your health.

Experts say one way to find out what you need to know to avoid health problems is a wellness assessment.

At **Mercy HealthPlex**, wellness assessments are included with memberships. It also offers on-site and off-site corporate wellness programs that typically include wellness assessments as the initial step.

Pam Butler, Mercy’s executive director of wellness, said assessments take about an hour. They include measurements of height, weight, blood pressure and body fat plus an assessment of a person’s flexibility and cardio-respiratory fitness using a bike or a treadmill. They also include a lifestyle questionnaire about the subject’s sleep, nutrition and social habits.

“We see what America looks like. It is what it is,” Butler said. Some people are in fine shape, but the majority need to exercise more, need to lose weight, need to eat better, she said.

Mercy and other similar facilities such as the **University of Cincinnati Wellness Center** offer a variety of a la carte services that can focus on specific areas that might need improvement. Mercy’s services include massages, group fitness classes, strength training, corporate boot camps, lunch-and-learn programs, mind/body classes such as yoga and tai chi, and nutrition and weight management programs.

Mike Comb, vice president in charge of the three Mercy HealthPlex facilities, said businesses want to lower health care costs, reduce absenteeism and improve productivity. But most take a shotgun approach that gets people excited for a few weeks and fades away without any meaningful change. So Mercy is developing corporate programs that will track results and demonstrate the benefits achieved over time.

Cincinnati-based **Allostatix LLC**, a startup biotechnology company, is marketing a wellness assessment tool that takes what it describes as a whole-body approach. Based on

international data derived from two observational studies of some 25,000 people over 25 years, the company's proprietary Allostatix Load Test is intended to measure the cumulative effects of daily stress on the body.

Founder and CEO Gordon Horwitz said the accumulation of "allostatic load" can predict wellness or illness three to five years in advance with a high degree of accuracy. The test uses blood tests that are similar to those a doctor uses for an annual physical, but they analyze more biometric markers, Horwitz said.

The key advantage of Allostatix's test over traditional assessments is that it can identify large numbers of people who are headed for a "train smash" long before they show any symptoms of problems, he said. By contrast, traditional assessments only work if something gets out of the normal range.

"If there's nothing out of range, for all intents and purposes, the doctor has nothing to work on," Horwitz said. "If you're not spending money at the doctor and pharmacy, and you're not drinking more than 20 drinks a week, you're OK."

Horwitz said Allostatix's test can benefit businesses and employees by identifying at-risk employees who are missed by other assessments. They can then take advantage of traditional wellness programs and make lifestyle adjustments to reduce their likelihood of future problems.

Road to Wellness

- Wellness tips from Pam Butler, executive director of wellness at Mercy HealthPlex:
- For better nutrition, try using the 80/20 rule: Eat really good 80 percent of the time so that you can afford to break the rules occasionally.
- Get plenty of sleep. Eight hours is ideal for adults, or a range of seven to nine. Many people try to get by on five, which is not nearly enough, she said.
- Relax and socialize.
- Get 60 minutes of physical activity every day (not necessarily all at once), including three or four days a week of vigorous activity that breaks a sweat and gets your heart rate up.
- "The fitness industry kind of sugarcoated it for years, but it's not working. You need to sweat if you want to improve your health," Butler said.

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