

Healthy Meeting

Although the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has set the standard for excellence in patient care, encouraging positive health behaviors in employees and providing a healthy work environment also supports the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) culture of excellence. In the interest of meeting its mission, the VHA hosts numerous important meetings and conferences for employees. This document provides suggestions for hosting meetings or conferences that provide a physically and psychologically healthy atmosphere and encourages health-promoting behaviors. It also incorporates many suggestions as feasible to budget and staffing.

Potential Benefits

The healthy meeting format gives a positive health-promoting message to participants and clearly demonstrates the VHA's strong commitment to the health and wellness of its employees.

Healthy employees are more productive than less healthy employees, use less sick leave, become disabled less frequently, use less Worker's Compensation, and utilize fewer health care services. The health-promoting atmosphere of a "healthy meeting" may empower, enable, and encourage participants to engage in healthy behaviors and enhance learning.

Potential Costs

Hosting a healthy meeting should not be any more expensive than a usual meeting. Healthier food options may increase cost depending upon the amount of labor involved in preparation, but cost-neutral options may be available in many cases. Creative meeting planning may also afford opportunities for physical activity without requiring additional meeting time, days, or space.

Healthy Meeting Considerations for the Meeting Planner

Select a hotel or meeting venue that is totally smoke-free in all interior spaces, including sleeping rooms.

Select a hotel or meeting venue located in areas where safe walking/running routes are available.

Arrange free or discounted access to the hotel's fitness center.

Make available to participants a list of local restaurants within walking distance that offer healthy menu items, and provide copies of or access to their menus if possible. Make the "Healthy Meeting" logo a prominent part of the printed and/or Web-based program announcement and other marketing materials.

As part of the conference packet that participants receive when they check in, include printed wellness cards/materials, and a form and instructions for creating a personal wellness plan, etc.

Request healthy food to be served at the meeting such as:

Breakfast Buffet Options:

- Nonfat or low-fat yogurt selection;
- Seasonal fruit, bananas, and apples;
- Low-fat cereal selection with nonfat/low-fat milk;
- Whole grain bread, small low-fat muffins, low-fat cream cheese;
- Peanut butter or yogurt-based spreads;
- Granola bars;
- Selection of bottled fruit juices;
- Regular and decaffeinated coffee and tea; and
- Bottled water.

Lunch and Dinner Options:

- Box lunch selection with sandwich, salad, and fruit (instead of cookie);
- Stand alone lunch entrée such as salad selection with low-fat and/or low-calorie salad dressings available; and
- Buffet or seated menus featuring healthy selections such as baked skinless chicken breast or other lean meats, green salad, grilled, steamed, or roasted vegetables, multi-grain roll or crusty bread, vegetarian entrees, fresh fruit, sherbet, or other low-calorie or low-fat desserts, etc.

Break Refreshments:

- Available mid-morning and mid-afternoon;
- Sugar-free sodas, some of which are also caffeine-free, selection of bottled fruit juices, bottled water;
- Seasonal fruit, bananas, and apples; and

- Crackers and low-fat cheese, granola bars, pretzels, nuts.

Reception Hors d'oeuvres:

- Include low-fat selections such as vegetables, fresh fruit, lean beef or pork, small rolls or bread selection; and
- Arrange for labels to be available describing the nutritional content for each of the major food selections served during the meeting.

For the Program Content Manager

Make prominent mention of the healthy meeting format during the opening address and on other occasions by both printed and verbal means throughout the meeting.

Have reminders to stretch, walk, or otherwise engage in physical activity prominently displayed and verbally mentioned during the meeting.

Host an early morning walk/run/roll or other physical activity event. Either guided or self-guided courses with maps (if appropriate) and a marked course are suggested. Additional activities might include a low impact aerobic session, yoga, tai chi, or similar activity.

Encourage participants to stand and stretch in place between speaker and/or presentation changes.

Encourage a business casual dress code.

Plan session lengths to minimize fatigue.

Schedule ample opportunities for interactive small group sessions or similar arrangements to allow meeting participants to be actively engaged in the topic at hand.

Encourage brainstorming and other creative thinking about the topic at hand during interactive small group sessions by providing time for such activity and specific exercises if appropriate.

Encourage the appropriate use of humor, attractive graphics, color, video, music, and other stimulating features in presentations while also making the slides simple and uncluttered.

At one or more occasions during a series of large group plenary sessions, have a qualified physical activity specialist lead the audience in brief (2-3 minutes) and fun stretching and physical activity.

Schedule a brief (10-15 minute) relaxation exercise at least once during the meeting, or preferably, each day.

Offer an optional session that focuses on stress reduction skills.
Include a presentation by a known humorous speaker to encourage a lighter mood to the meeting. Consider using a video clip if cost is an issue.

