A NOUNCE OF PREVENTION is worth a pound of cure. This simple statement seems to make a lot of sense but for some reason has not been accepted in the medical and health-care fields. In the United States approximately a trillion dollars each year is spent on health care. A much smaller amount is spent on the prevention of injuries and diseases, but mounting evidence illustrates that much of the morbidity and mortality associated with chronic diseases might be preventable. 

A shift toward prevention is under way, however, and will continue to gain momentum as attempts are made to curtail health-care costs. One health-care professional who focuses on prevention is the certified athletic trainer (ATC). ATCs are highly educated, multiskilled allied health-care professionals who work in a variety of settings such as rural and urban hospital emergency rooms; urgent- and ambulatory-care centers; military hospitals; sports-medicine clinics; high schools, colleges, and universities; commercial employers; professional sports teams; and performing-arts companies. The diverse skills possessed by ATCs are tremendous assets for programs related to prevention, wellness, and fitness. According to a NATA educational flyer, “as the U.S. begins its fight against the obesity epidemic, it is important that people have access to health care professionals who can support lifelong physical activity for all ages.”

The Centers for Disease Control consider obesity one of the top threats to good health for U.S. citizens (Figure 1). According to Kelly Brownell, director of the Yale Center for Eating and Weight Disorders, “once you are obese it is very hard to treat, so prevention makes sense.” Applying their education in nutrition and fitness, ATCs are key resources for individuals wanting a proactive approach to health care and obesity. ATCs excel as motivators, and because of this have found great success working with individuals on decreasing obesity and obesity-related problems.

Aurora BayCare (Green Bay, WI) has developed a weight-management and obesity program that employs ATCs. The weight-management program is designed for both pediatric and adult populations. Individuals participating in the program have access to information via the Internet, telephone, and group classes. Along with advice related to nutrition and exercise, the program encourages participants to join support groups related to weight management. Todd Bruss, licensed athletic trainer and manager of sports medicine at Aurora BayCare, says “our weight-management program is going to focus on the whole person, which is why the support group is a key feature of the program” (personal communication, December 2004). He goes on to state, “We hope that as participants find success with their weight management there will be similar improvements in their overall mood and life satisfaction.” This statement echoes that of James F. Fries, MD, professor of medicine, Stanford University School of Medicine, who claims that “health is its own reward. People feel better when they’re healthy.”

The term wellness is heard frequently these days, and for good reason. Wellness is a buzzword that many employees are exposed to at the workplace. For some, wellness is associated with their health-insurance plan and premium; for others, it is something they have been practicing for years. A good starting point for gauging one’s “wellness” is through a health-risk appraisal (HRA). There are numerous forms of HRAs available in the marketplace. A comprehensive appraisal consists of an analysis of blood cholesterol, HDL, LDL, and glucose levels. Other important measures to obtain during an
HRA include height, weight, body-mass index, and blood pressure.

Once the HRA results are available, an ATC can design numerous programs to help individuals improve their wellness. Specific programs focus on hypertension, cholesterol, stress, nutrition, drug and alcohol use, weight loss, smoking cessation, and a variety of other conditions related to health and wellness. After the initial program is developed, the ATC will interact regularly with individuals to modify their goals and program(s) as needed.

Many employers are beginning to recognize the benefits of on-site wellness programs. According to the Wellness Council of America (www.welcoa.org), 80% of all companies with 50 or more employees have some form of on-site health-promotion program at the workplace. The obvious reason for workplace wellness programs is that a company pays the health-care costs for its employees, so the healthier the workforce, the lower the health-care expenses. In addition, employees spend almost half their waking hours at work, so the workplace is a convenient place to implement on-site health and wellness programs.

One not-so-obvious reason for supporting an on-site wellness program is that employees with high health risks tend to have the highest workers’ compensation costs. A study by Musich, Napier, and Edington demonstrated that as health risks such as smoking, physical inactivity, high blood pressure, cholesterol, and life dissatisfaction increase, so do work-related injuries. ATCs’ diverse expertise related to health and wellness has led to employment opportunities with companies to provide on-site wellness services. The same study found that 100% of companies that employed an ATC reported a positive return on investment, with 83% of these companies demonstrating a return on investment higher than $3 for every $1 invested. Along with health and wellness services, numerous companies use ATCs to provide on-site physical rehabilitation, ergonomics, injury-prevention, fitness, and many other programs designed to prevent and manage injuries and to ultimately save themselves money.

Regardless of age or physical condition, anyone can benefit from improved fitness. Improving fitness is quite possibly the most influential lifestyle change individuals can make to improve their health and well-being. The benefits associated with an increase in moderate physical activity have repeatedly been shown to decrease the risk of heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes while increasing energy levels.