

A Vacation Away Keeps the Doctor at Bay!

By Mark Moran, MPH – WebMD Feature



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We need to take vacations seriously as stated by Alan Muney, MD, executive vice president and chief medical officer at Oxford Health Plans Inc. "While we readily accept that getting immunizations, taking vitamins, or getting mammograms and pap smears is good preventive medicine, something as simple as taking a vacation is not accepted."

Two recent surveys appear to bear him out. One survey conducted by Oxford Health Plans of more than 600 men and women shows that about one in five people report feeling so overworked that they are unable to use up all of their allotted vacation time.

The survey showed that while most employers make it easy to keep medical appointments (70%) and return to work after illness (68%), other companies exude a corporate culture that discourages healthy behavior, according to the Oxford survey.

Approximately 19% of survey respondents said workplace pressures make them feel they must attend work even when injured or sick; 17% said it is difficult to take time off or leave work in an emergency, and 8% believe that if they were to become seriously ill they would be fired or demoted.

The survey also showed that 14% of respondents feel company management only promotes people who habitually work late, according to Oxford.

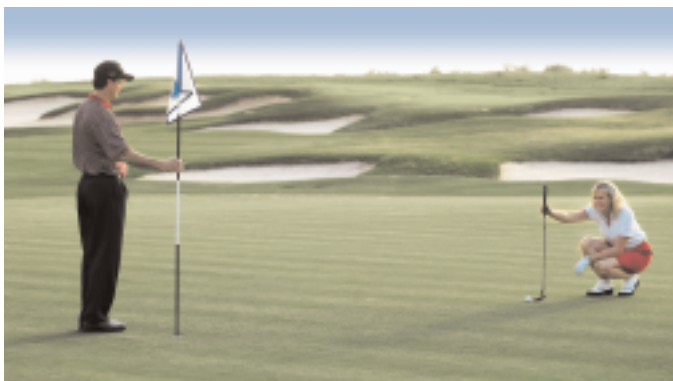
Another survey of 1,100 company executives by the American Management Association, or AMA, found similar results. It showed that only about a third of executives would get away from work for more than a week at a time.

What's more, when American executives do take vacation, they are very liable to take their work with them -- checking email and voice mail regularly and using cell phones. And more and more people are actually taking work along with them.

Like the Oxford survey, the AMA survey found that although one-quarter of executives have earned more than two weeks off, only 7% would actually use the time this summer.

Both surveys seem to underscore what Muney calls a "cultural belief

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that not working is a bad thing." And he contrasts that belief with European countries where it is the norm for workers to have three or more weeks of vacation a year.

"When we do take vacation, we seem to take these long-weekend type approaches that may or may not add up to having enough time to unwind," Muney tells WebMD.

Muney says the Oxford survey was prompted by, among other things, a study appearing in the September-October 2000 edition of the medical journal *Psychosomatic Medicine*, showing that vacationing could help prevent heart disease.

In that study, conducted by Brooks Gump, PhD, of the department of psychology at the State University of New York at Oswego, the frequency of vacationing was studied among more than 12,000 men at high risk for heart disease over a nine-year period. **Results showed that men who took vacations had significantly less risk of dying from heart disease -- or any other condition -- than men who did not.**

Muney says the results suggest that American employers who make it a practice to monitor employees who take too much time off, would do well to also monitor those who work too much. It could save them money in healthcare costs, he says.

Cardiologist Stephen Sinatra, MD, assistant clinical professor of medicine at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine in Farmington, says the *Psychosomatic Medicine* study confirms his own belief that too much work and not enough play is bad for the heart. "When my patients tell me they can't afford to take a vacation, I tell them they can't afford not to," he tells WebMD.

Sinatra and Muney both agree that what you do on your vacation is not nearly so important as what you don't do. **"Don't take your busy life along with you," Sinatra says. "A vacation should truly be a holiday."**

And Muney says, "The message should be: Leave your laptop at home."

Both Sinatra and Muney say that what makes for a healthy vacation is really a holiday of the mind. Your vacation could be in the backyard watching the grass grow, as long as you stay there long enough to forget about work, they say.

"A lot of what this is about is a mental attitude," Muney tells WebMD. "When you come back, you should feel refreshed with a new perspective. This would seem to indicate a period of time longer than a long weekend."

And Sinatra says vacations can be a way of reconnecting with family. Camping trips, especially, are an economical way to spend time with kids, away from the distractions of television and commercial fare.

Recalling his own camping vacations as a child with his parents, Sinatra says, "it was the greatest vacation I ever had. The best thing my father could give me was the gift of himself and his undivided attention."

