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Cooper Aerobics exec touts happy pills for workers

By: Cheryl Hall

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Todd Whitthorne says that his souped-up multivitamin and two high-potency omega-3 softgels can create a happier, healthier, less stressed-out workforce.

So the 56-year-old executive for Cooper Aerobics' corporate wellness company and nutritional supplements unit is paying a nutritional research team in Australia \$140,000 to test whether the three-pill packs can improve immunity and mood while reducing sickness and absenteeism.

The report should be in hand by the end of the year.

The goal is to sell Cooper Complete Nutritional Supplements, but Whitthorne says he's also a man on a mission.

"I'm a capitalist with a bent on public health," Whitthorne said over lunch at the Cooper Clinic campus. "I firmly believe that this makes sense."

Whitthorne is a data guy. And the data tells him that we don't get enough omega-3, vitamin D and B vitamins because of our crummy American diets. Meanwhile, we're overdosing on omega-6 fatty acids. They're found in processed foods and are increasingly linked to arthritis, inflammation and cancer.

Whitthorne contends that if you bring the levels of omega-3 and vitamin D to healthy levels — "not crazy, over-the-top levels" — good things happen. Chronic pain and incidents of colds, flu and upper-respiratory infections are lessened. Stress declines and moods improve.

A previous study by the team at Swinburne University in Melbourne showed that B vitamins lowered workplace stress up to 20 percent. That's what hooked Whitthorne on the idea for his study of other nutrients, especially omega-3 and vitamin D.

Think New Age happy pills.

"Those who suffer from light to moderate depression feel better. They don't quite have that cloud hanging over them," he said, hastening to add that he's not suggesting these as a replacement for antidepressants.

Nearly 80 percent of Cooper's first-time patients have what the clinic considers a deficiency in vitamin D, while nearly 90 percent don't have enough omega-3.

Whitthorne points to more than 18,000 published studies outlining the benefits of omega-3. “This has been going on since the ’70s with the first cardiovascular studies of Eskimos asking why in the world they didn’t have heart attacks.”

More milligrams

Cooper Complete’s “Healthy Body Pack” has two fish-oil softgels with 1,200 milligrams of the two most important omega-3 fatty acids, EPA and DHA. I found just 148 milligrams of the dynamic duo in the supplement I pulled out of my medicine cabinet.

Do we really need 1,200 milligrams?

The “therapeutic window” — medical lingo for the dose needed to show measurable improvement — for EPA plus DHA is at least 1,000 milligrams a day, he says. A 3-ounce serving of Atlantic salmon provides about 1,800 milligrams of these two fatty acids.

“If we were eating salmon three or four times a week, we wouldn’t have to worry about this,” he said. “The problem is, the average American eats fish once every 11 days.”

The three-pack also has 2,000 IUs of vitamin D-3. Most multivitamins have 400 milligrams, he said. “That’s enough to keep you from getting rickets. But it’s not enough to keep you from getting other conditions: cardiovascular disease, chronic pain and 17 types of cancer.”

Every day an employee calls in sick costs the employer an average of \$640, according to Whitthorne’s research. So a one-week bout of flu is a \$3,200 loss.

Succumb to a flu epidemic, as many local companies recently did, and the damage to operations grows exponentially.

Vitamin D significantly improves immunity, Whitthorne said. “I think I can establish an ROI on it.”

Anecdotal tests

He’s also running anecdotal tests with four, soon to be five, local companies. He’s selling the 30-day canisters to companies for \$16. The normal retail price on Cooper Aerobics’ website is \$27. Plus, he’s providing companies that sign up with a newsletter, lunch-and-learn sessions and webinars.

David Greer, CEO of NextCorp Ltd., a software company in Irving, began offering the supplements to his 24 employees in October.

“We have already seen fewer employees knocked out by the last round of flu,” Greer said. “An added plus, I have had several employees privately thank me for taking an active interest in their personal well-being.”

Matt Oldroyd, president and CEO of Partsmaster in Irving, said paying \$16 a month for each of his leadership members and their direct reports is a no-brainer even if it only has a small impact. “One of our employees didn’t get sick over the holidays this year as she claims she always does. She believes the vitamins played a role in that.”

Whitthorne said the folks at Cooper have already substantiated the benefits of its supplements, but he wanted “a credible, credentialed third party” to put its stamp of approval (or not) on the simple regimen so that he could sell the program to companies.

This is a lot of money for Cooper Complete, which sold \$3.1 million in supplements last year. “I could sell a lot more product of Cooper Complete if I put that \$140,000 into marketing and advertising. But that’s not who we are.”

And as much as he believes in his supplements, Whitthorne said there is something much more important in the healthy living equation. “Exercise trumps everything else,” he said. “Walk the dog, even if you don’t have one.”