



Our expert analysis

2022 Benefits Canada Healthcare Survey



Charles Déragon
Strategic Leader, Disability and Prevention Products
Group Benefits and Retirement Solutions
iA Financial Group

[Meet our expert](#)

The global COVID-19 pandemic has caused upheaval that has dramatically changed people's lives and habits. It has also sparked a revolution that has radically transformed the way people view work, wellness, health-care and finances. Employees now expect employers and plan sponsors to support their diverse needs, from the simplest to the most complex.

That makes it a definite asset to have a complete benefits program designed with the **total wellness** of staff in mind. While health benefits plans seem to have improved over the past two years, the effects of the pandemic are still being felt. This is reflected in the **2022 Benefits Canada Healthcare Survey¹**, of which iA Financial Group is a proud Platinum sponsor. It paints a picture of how members and health benefit plan sponsors perceive the mental, financial and physical health of Canadians.

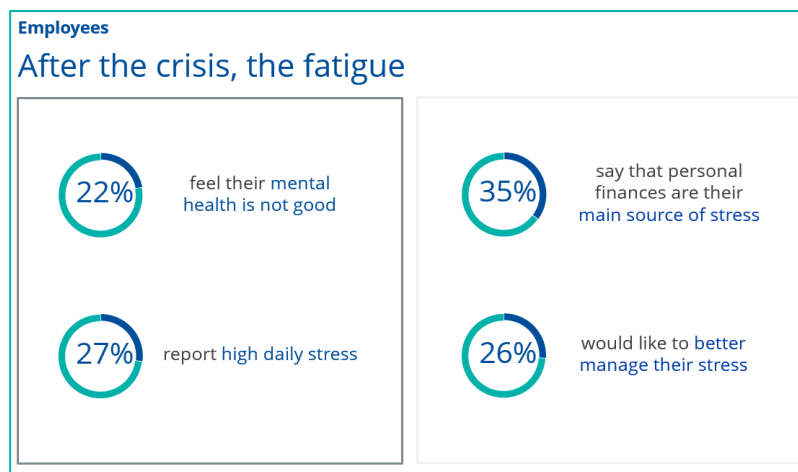
Read on to learn about our key takeaways from the survey results as we explore insights gained and possible solutions.

¹ Large survey of 1,000 plan members and 550 group insurance plan sponsors across Canada. The results show employees' perceptions of their health benefit plan and the impact of the workplace environment on their health. The full report was released on September 21, 2022.



Mental health

We know that many people have experienced **significant psychological distress** during the pandemic. Long periods of isolation, being separated from loved ones and economic disruption have had a profound impact on mental health. Although most people rated their overall health as generally excellent or very good, more than one in five rated their mental health as poor in the past year. And when people consider their overall health to be poor, that proportion increases to three out of four.



Source: 2022 Benefits Canada healthcare survey

Mental health has therefore become a top concern for many, including employers and insurers. Both groups have been proactive, with many improving their tools and services to support staff and their families. iA Financial Group has been a leader in that regard. The informative health content, virtual healthcare services, counselling and coaching services as well as therapy and wellness platforms that we have developed and delivered to our clients have stood out since the beginning of the pandemic.

The survey confirms **that when an employer offers mental health resources, employees are more likely to rate the quality of the health benefits plan as excellent or good** (84% vs. 54% when these resources are not provided).

We see this as good news, since about 6 out of 10 plan sponsors are offering mental health training or support programs to managers or staff in 2022, compared to only about one-third five years ago.

Differing perceptions

It's clear that plan members and employers seem to have different views on **how effectively mental health issues are being managed**. Only one out of two people feel that their employer is able to effectively help staff deal with these issues. For people who feel their employer is not helping staff effectively manage their mental health issues and who rate their own mental health as poor, the percentage rises to 79%. Job satisfaction and a workplace culture of wellness also influence these results.

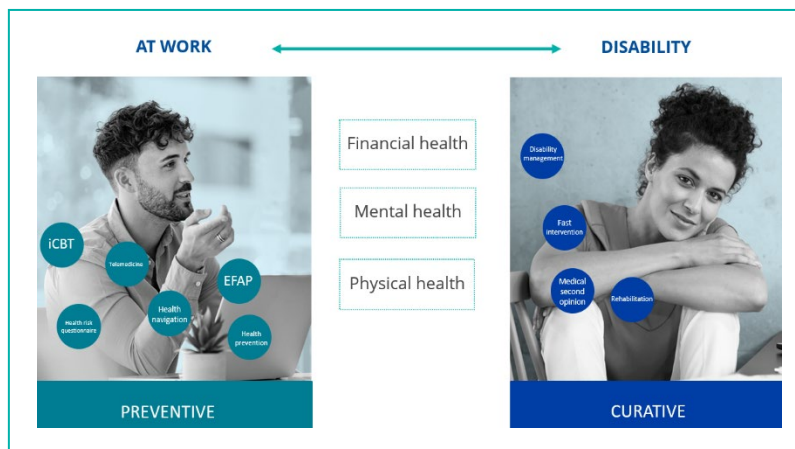


Source: 2022 Benefits Canada healthcare survey

Prevention and education: success factors

Half of plan sponsors have increased or are planning to increase their coverage for mental health counselling services. At iA Financial Group, we continue to work with our groups and partners to implement tools and initiatives that support workplace mental health. **We believe that promoting employee mental wellness is a winning approach** that not only prevents disabilities, but also improves job satisfaction, boosts productivity and makes it easier to attract and retain top talent.

When people are temporarily unable to work, early intervention, personalized plans, regular communication, rehabilitation and a proactive, holistic approach are some of the practices we recommend to ensure a healthy, effective and sustainable return to work.



Mental health – iA Financial Group tools and services

- **Health navigation platform:** a front-line resource in our health and wellness offer that provides clear and helpful information on a variety of health-related topics, including mental health.
- **Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP):** professional support to deal with difficult everyday situations.
- **Stay Healthy at Work™:** a proactive disability prevention solution that offers online tools and personalized coaching.
- **Manager Support Program:** an advisory service for managers to help them deal more effectively with difficult situations with staff or colleagues.
- **Stress Management and Well-Being Program:** a personalized program to support mental health and wellness.
- **Internet-based cognitive behavioural therapy (iCBT):** self-directed therapy to manage issues like depression and anxiety.



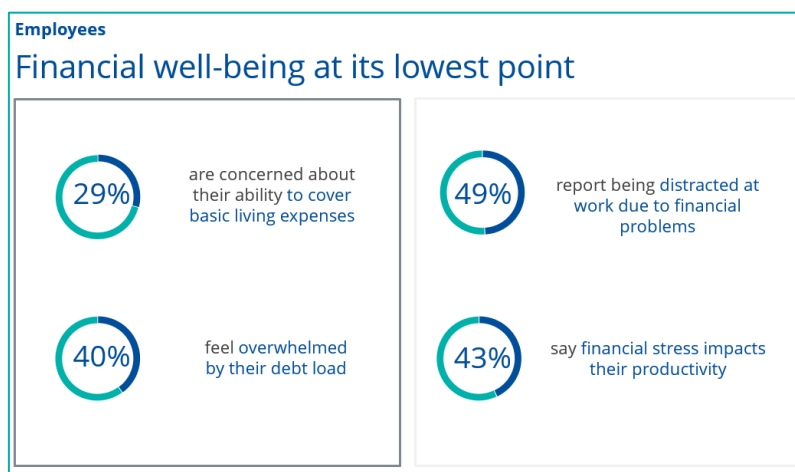
We believe that promoting employee mental wellness is a winning approach.



Financial health

On the economic front, the past two years have been very turbulent: stock markets plunged at the beginning of the pandemic and yo-yoed afterwards, inflation soared, interest rates spiked and a recession began to rear its head.

This disruption is on top of the already precarious financial situation in which some people were at the beginning of the pandemic due to job loss or reduced income. As previously mentioned, **more than one in three people cite personal finances as a source of stress.**



Source: The Canadian payroll association (2020)

Support from employers

Employers have tentatively started focusing on financial wellness and education programs for their staff. According to the Benefits Canada survey, 12% of health benefit plans now include a financial support program. **Employers are therefore starting to implement engagement strategies to help employees achieve their personal financial goals instead of focusing solely on retirement savings programs.** We say “tentatively” because in all the health and wellness investments made by plan sponsors, financial health ranks fifth (last) out of the five health pillars (mental health, physical health, chronic disease prevention or management, social health, financial health).

Group retirement savings plan providers now have several tools to help people achieve their financial wellness goals. Technology even allows them to develop action plans and deliver personalized advice based on each person’s:

- Situation
- Awareness level
- Financial literacy
- Habits
- Time constraints

Employees can also get access to financial education specialists who can provide information about their retirement plan and investment options, explain retirement income options, educate them about finances in general and more. These experts have also started using virtual outreach strategies to serve everyone, no matter where they are in the country.

Initiatives related to financial health will undoubtedly become increasingly important moving forward, given the recent spike in the cost of living, which will likely continue into 2023.



Financial health – iA Financial Group tools and services

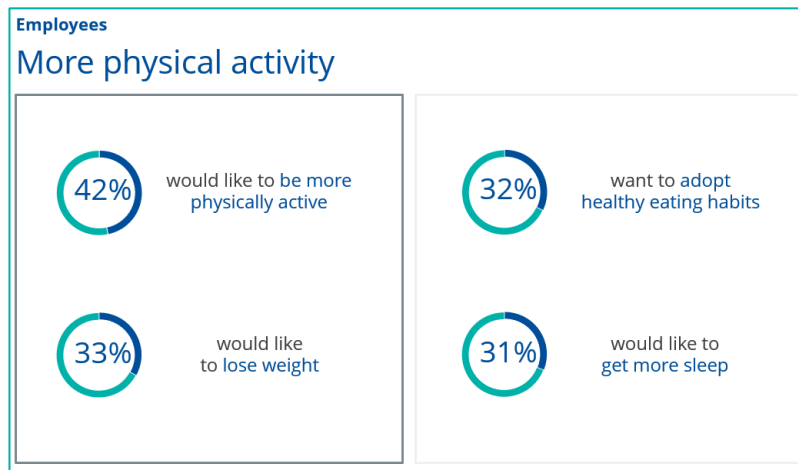
- **iA Mobile and My Client Space:** allow people to easily manage their retirement savings and includes several online tools.
- **My Retirement website:** provides coaching for retirement planning that takes people’s life stages into account.
- **Financial Wellness Zone:** helps people find and commit to financial balance and develop their financial literacy.
- **Financial Wellness Assessment:** measures financial health for each pillar of personal finances and provides tools and a personalized action plan.
- **Education Specialists:** raise members’ awareness while educating and supporting them.
- **Communication program:** helps people be proactive about their retirement planning and financial wellness with simple and intuitive content, tools and concepts.
- **CoPilot:** provides support when people are changing jobs or retiring.
- **Statement:** allows people to track their progress towards retirement goals through clear and simple language and visuals.
- **Diversified investment options:** serve the needs both of people with little or no interest in finance and those who closely follow economic news and manage their own investments (including sustainable investment funds).



Initiatives related to financial health will undoubtedly become increasingly important.

Physical health

One thing is clear: the pandemic has increased sedentary lifestyles. Public health measures related to sports activities and gatherings have had an undeniable impact on Canadians' energy expenditure and physical health.



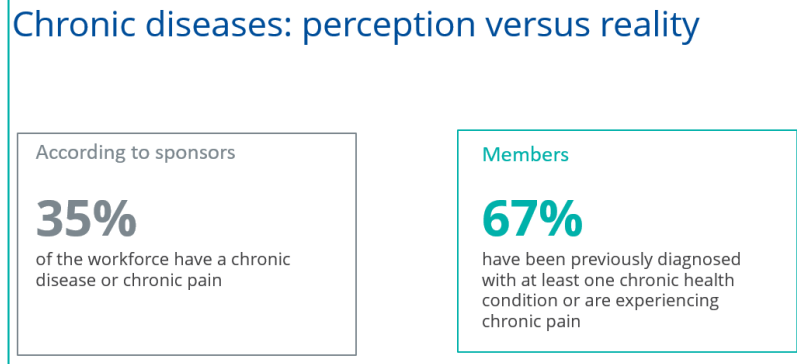
Source: 2022 Benefits Canada healthcare survey

The survey results show that after two years of isolation during the pandemic, **people want to improve their lifestyle and be more active**. For the first time, obesity is on the list of chronic diseases identified by those who responded to the survey.

Although the survey shows that people want to improve their health by being physically active (42%), losing weight (33%) or eating a healthier diet (32%), medication is still the main component in treating people with chronic disease. **We believe our industry needs to find ways to provide more support to facilitate these behaviour changes.**

Chronic illness and pain

The survey showed again this year that plan sponsors underestimate the percentage of their workforce experiencing chronic pain or illness (35%) as well as the percentage of people who have been previously diagnosed with at least one chronic health condition or are experiencing chronic pain (67%). Of the chronic problems, mental health tops the list. This raises the question of why this gap or “disconnect” exists between employers and their staff.



Source: 2022 Benefits Canada healthcare survey

Wellness accounts

In an effort to help improve employee wellness during the pandemic, many employers have expanded the types of expenses covered by wellness accounts. As the survey’s advisory board noted, the pandemic has highlighted the importance of prevention, and several employers have stepped up and “gone all in” to support employees and their families. Now that the worst of the crisis seems to be over, many employers are looking to recalibrate and **adopt a formal wellness strategy**.

Will employers be able to effectively meet the needs of their staff? We’ll be keeping a close eye on that.



Physical health – iA Financial Group tools and services

- **Well-Balanced®**: a comprehensive offering that lets groups design a customized health and wellness program or enhance their existing program.
- **Health navigation platform**: a front-line resource of our health and wellness offer that provides clear and helpful information on various health-related topics.
- **Stay Healthy at Work™**: a proactive disability prevention solution that offers online tools and personalized coaching.
- **Virtual healthcare (Dialogue)**: a broad and comprehensive range of telemedicine services that allow for rapid resolution of health problems without having to travel or wait in line at a clinic.
- **Medical Second Opinion**: a service providing a second opinion and support from specialists when diagnosing a serious medical condition or critical illness.
- **Health risk assessment questionnaire**: a tool for people to determine their risk level regarding eight health-related topics.
- **PharmAssist, PharmAssist Pro and PharmAssist Flex**: drug management solutions, tools and expertise.

Communication and simplicity: a winning formula

Targeted communication strategies and training for group insurance plan members are key to achieving better overall health. For example, a flexible plan is designed to better meet people's diverse needs. However, these plans tend to become very complex, resulting in most people sticking with the **default** plan options, which is the opposite of the intended goal. **This negatively impacts the value of a flexible plan and members' health.**

To address this, we recommend employers ask themselves the following questions:

- Are our communication tools clear, simple and adapted to the target?
- How proactive am I in managing the overall health and wellness of my staff?
- Do my wellness program and health benefit plan really meet the needs of my staff?
- Are tools and services being used optimally? If not, why?

Two-way communication

It's also necessary to **survey staff regularly** so they can weigh in on the programs in place, what works, what doesn't and what they would like to see added.

It can also be very useful to have regular meetings between managers and team members to take stock of the situation, to assess the level of stress and what's causing it. Providing managers with a targeted support program so they're better equipped to deal with difficult situations, stress, conflict or burnout can also be a big help. **It's encouraging to see that these training programs for managers or employees (especially for mental health) have been on the rise over the past five years.**

Communication and personnel training

- Understand the needs of the workforce: survey
- Vulgarize the information
- Training sessions at hiring and key moments
- Multiply the forms of communication
- Repeat and increase the pace of communication



Equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI)

Not surprisingly, people who experience workplace discrimination are twice as likely to have high or extremely high stress levels: 43% compared to 21% for those who have not faced workplace discrimination.

One in five (21%) say they are not comfortable being themselves in their workplace, which is significant.

In today's labour market, providing a work environment based on equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) is no longer just a "nice to have," it's a necessity. Providing employee benefits that meet the needs of a diverse workforce creates an inclusive employer brand, which is critical to attracting and retaining top talent. People who enjoy their work and feel their benefit plan reflects their needs are more likely to be themselves and have a positive influence at work.

Plan sponsors seem to have recognized this new reality: the survey shows that 72% now have an EDI strategy.

Virtual healthcare services are a must

Diversity also affects work models: traditional, remote, hybrid, flexible, etc. Today, with telework on the rise, healthcare systems stretched to the limit, and more and more people without access to a family doctor, virtual healthcare services have become indispensable. These virtual services, particularly for mental health, are very much appreciated by employees. Virtual health care was coming on strong before the pandemic, and it's continuing to grow very rapidly. The benefits are clear: quick and convenient access to health care, reduced wait times, decreased absenteeism at work and less pressure on the public healthcare system.

This new way of accessing healthcare and wellness services is so popular **that many employees now expect these services to automatically be part of group insurance plans**, which doesn't surprise us. We see this as a great opportunity for insurers and employers to work together on providing services that are convenient and user-friendly.

Conclusion

At iA Financial Group, we believe in a comprehensive benefits package that engages employees in their overall wellness. By leveraging advanced technologies such as predictive analytics, digital diagnostics and therapeutics, biometric sensors and personalized programs, and bringing various partners together in an open ecosystem, group insurance plan providers will continue to refine and expand their services to ensure a healthier and happier workforce.

Key takeaways



INVESTED IN YOU.