Picking the right option
AWARDS PROMOTE A HEALTHY WORKPLACE

AST Year 13 HSE sites were awarded the Healthy Eating Award and five hospitals received the Active at Work award at a ceremony hosted by the HSE on behalf of the Irish Heart Foundation in Dr Steeven’s Hospital.

The Health and Wellbeing Division supports the Irish Heart Foundation with these awards, as one of the largest employers in the public service and because of the known benefits of heart health.

Dr Stephen O’Deeife, National Director, Health and Wellbeing, commented: “We recognise workplace health programmes are one of the best ways to prevent lifestyle diseases and improve mental health and wellbeing. We believe as the health services, we are well placed to lead on improving lifestyle and wellbeing - not only for the populations we serve but as an employee.”

With so much interest in workplace health, it is timely for the Irish Heart Foundation to expand its long-standing workplace Healthy Eating Award to include three levels from 2016 – bronze, silver and gold – to further drive standards in relation to healthy food selections for staff restaurants.

The HSE was just one of a growing number of companies engaging in Irish Heart Foundation’s (IHF) health and wellbeing award programmes to help employees become more physically active and have healthier diets.

Sixty seven companies were certified this year by the Irish Heart Foundation under their Healthy Eating Awards to provide and promote healthy meal options in their restaurants and since the programme began in 2006, up to 400 companies have been certified benefitting 600,000 employees nationwide.

At the Foundation’s presentation of awards to 92 companies, the national charity said workplace health is more than a “tick the box” exercise and it can be used very effectively to increase productivity, reduce absenteeism and to boost overall morale and positivity.

Emerging research shows that sitting for prolonged periods is associated with increased risk for heart disease and stroke, even if individuals are regularly physically active. Further research has shown that one third of premature heart disease is due to poor diets alone and the benefit of promoting healthy diets can help to reduce employees’ weight, cholesterol and blood pressure levels.

With many office workers sitting for six or seven hours a day and 61 pc of adults being overweight or obese, workplaces can play an important role in providing an environment that supports employees to move more throughout the day and eat more healthily.

President of the Irish Heart Foundation Prof Declan Sugrue said: “Serious health problems face us as a nation with heart disease and stroke at the top of the list claiming more lives than any other cause of death in this country.

The good news is that 80 pc of cardiovascular disease is largely preventable but tackling these diseases is more than a matter of individual responsibility. Creating a supportive environment to empower individuals where they work or live is essential. About two million people are employed in Ireland and the workplace is a key setting in which we can work together to make a difference.”

As a pioneer in the field of workplace health since 1992, the Irish Heart Foundation welcomed new legislation announced recently by the Minister for Health, to ensure Health and Wellbeing policies are in place to improve the health of the Irish public-sector workforce which represents thousands of workers.

Meanwhile, the newer Active@Work Award, founded in 2013 was presented to 25 companies in recognition of efforts to boost employee physical activity levels at work. Promoting an active workforce has the potential to reduce sick days by as much as 27 pc and drive down absenteeism by up to 20 pc.

Prof Sugrue added: “It is very heartening to see so many companies across the country receiving our Healthy Eating and Active@Work Awards and contributing greatly to the effort. These companies represent all sectors - from hospitals, to financial services and banks, to manufacturing and community groups. I acknowledge the HSE’s invaluable support over many years for the Foundation’s workplace programme and these awards.”

Tony O’Brien, Director General of the Health Service, HSE, who presented the awards, said: “According to the World Health Organisation workplace health programmes are one of the best ways to prevent lifestyle diseases, such as CVD, and improve mental health. The workplace is also identified as a key area of action in the Healthy Ireland Framework. WHO indicates that any costs associated with the measure should be minimal and will be recouped many times over by the benefits of a healthier workforce.

“As Director General of the Health Service any steps that can reduce the cost of disease to the taxpayer and to the health service is a major benefit and is vital in ensuring that we can sustain the health services into the future. It is estimated that 57 pc of the costs of cardiovascular diseases are directly linked to healthcare, 23 pc to productivity costs and 22 pc to informal care (EI HN 2008). So the health and wellbeing of employees is a win-win for employers, employees and the Health Services.”