

Participation in an Employer-Sponsored Wellness Program in the Era of COVID-19

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to document the level of participation in an employer-sponsored wellness program in the era of COVID-19. The program involved a 5-day administration of an herbal supplement, which contained ingredients used in Traditional Chinese Medicine. Ninety-two employees of a resort and spa volunteered to participate in an employer-based wellness program in the fall of 2020. Forty-six men and 46 women participated. Volunteers were given a 5-day supply of the respiratory detox substance (RDS), which is a proprietary mixture of naturally occurring herbs. Participants reported favorable experiences with the RDS, with the most frequently being increased energy, improved sleep, improved allergy symptoms and better breathing. On follow-up, most volunteers reported a willingness to receive the COVID-19 vaccine when personally eligible.

Keywords: COVID-19, Traditional Chinese Medicine, employer-based wellness, hospitality workers, respiratory detox shot

1. Introduction

Individuals working in the hospitality industry are at increased risk for acquiring COVID-19.¹ In March, 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced an abrupt shut-down of many restaurants and entertainment venues in the United States. Facilities that remained open during the pandemic, such as hotels, promptly enhanced cleaning protocols and provided employees with appropriate personal protective equipment such as face masks, face shields, hand sanitizer and gloves. Sanitizing procedures were intensified and cleaning products were bolstered in order to minimize the risk of transmission to future guests of the facilities, and to minimize the occupational risk of acquiring infection with SARS-CoV-2, the infectious pathogen of COVID-19.

Lansdowne Resort and Spa is located in Leesburg, Virginia, on the east coast of the United States. The sprawling estate includes a 296-room hotel, a lavish spa and 45 holes of golf. The slogan for the resort is, “discovering the joy of lifelong learning”. The establishment provides a broad variety of spa services and ample opportunities for relaxation and physical activity in order to cater to individual needs for wellness and self-care.

The overall well-being, and quality-of-life of resort guests and employees are important to the management and leadership of the facility. As such, there have been several complimentary health-related initiatives offered to employees of the resort and spa. The ownership and management teams are well versed in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), and purposefully design and infuse many of the wellness initiatives with principles of TCM and established, well-embraced herbal remedies.

Employer based wellness programs in the United States are quite popular, however, they most often focus on weight loss, increasing physical activity, stress reduction and smoking cessation.^{2,3} The health-related initiatives at Lansdowne Resort and Spa spotlight TCM, and emphasize the importance of restoring balance within the human body. Wellness initiatives at this facility are quite common and, in the past, included a Golden Fall Festival which included a prescribed diet to jump start weight loss and improve digestive and respiratory symptoms via the use of plant-based cuisine. The rationale for the Golden Fall is based on the Chinese calendar.

This wellness program involved a 5-day, twice-daily administration of an herbal supplement, which is a mixture of ingredients used in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) to alleviate respiratory symptoms. By means of in-vitro studies, an identical mixture of ingredients has demonstrated favorable effects in preventing infection with COVID-19 in lung parenchymal cells of humans.⁴

Respiratory Detox Shot (RDS) is a combination of 8 herbs, elderberry and honeycomb which, according to TCM, has the capacity to detoxify the respiratory system. Additionally, RDS is believed to be helpful in improving the body's ability to respond to allergens, boost energy and physical strength, promote digestion and absorption of food.⁴

RDS as a treatment for COVID-19 in China has been published elsewhere.⁴ This study cannot report whether or not the RDS is effective in preventing COVID-19 infections because it was not a randomized clinical trial. Instead, this study documents the willingness of workers in the hospitality industry to participate in a TCM-based wellness initiative offered by their place of employment in the pre-vaccine era of COVID-19.

1. Methods

Ninety-two employees of a destination resort and spa in the United States volunteered to participate in an employer-based wellness program in the fall of 2020. Volunteers were given a 5-day supply of the respiratory detox substance (RDS), which is a proprietary mixture of naturally occurring herbs that are commonly used in TCM. Volunteers were asked to ingest a morning and evening dose of 8 oz. of the mixture, which was packaged as a refrigerated liquid. Participants self-reported respiratory symptoms prior to, and after, the 5-day course of the RDS. Post-study surveys also asked about known exposures to people infected with COVID-19 during the study period, as well subjects' willingness to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, when available.

Approximately three months later, subjects were asked to complete a second survey which was comprised of 6 questions, including any exposures to anyone with COVID-19, duration of exposure, personal COVID-19 testing and willingness to become vaccinated when a vaccine becomes available in the United States.

2. Results

The study population consisted of an equal distribution of men (N=46) and women (N=46). Mean age was 44.8 years with a range of 18-68. Participants experienced favorable effects of the RDS listed in Table 1. Twenty-eight volunteers (30.4%) provided data at the second collection point. Mean age among those who provided data at follow-up was 46.3 (range 26-68). Among the 28 who provided data at follow-up, none had been tested for COVID-19, and 15 reported knowing someone who was COVID-19 positive throughout the study period. Five respondents reported a close contact with someone who ultimately tested COVID-19 positive. The reported exposures spanned 30 minutes to 5 days. An overwhelming majority, 78.5% reported a willingness to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, when available.

3. Discussion

There is an emphasis on health and wellbeing at this popular destination resort and spa, and workers are very familiar with workplace-based wellness initiatives. This innovation is noteworthy, as we are not aware of any other employer-based wellness programs specifically designed, and deployed in the hospitality industry, during the COVID-19 pandemic in either the United States or elsewhere.

At Lansdowne Resort and Spa, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is infused in the resort experience, and Chinese based dishes are always on the menus of the restaurants within the facility. At Lansdowne Resort and Spa, employees are far more knowledgeable about TCM than the general public, which likely contributed to the relatively high rates of participation. The motivation to participate in a wellness initiative that was sponsored by their employer, is evident among this population. These individuals also report a willingness to become vaccinated against COVID-19 when it becomes available.

This study commenced in the fall 2020 when worldwide, people were hungry for COVID-19 prevention strategies. At the time of this study, the COVID-19 vaccine was in the distant future. Employees in the hospitality industry, an industry that involves constant contact with others, and rapid turnover of a guest population, were particularly vulnerable for infection, and thereby eager to engage in plausible risk reduction strategies. Even after the COVID-19 vaccine is widely available, RDS may be an option for individuals who are vaccine hesitant or who have known allergies to components of the vaccine.

One important limitation of this study was attrition bias. Among the 92 participants who were enrolled, follow-up data is available for 28 people (30.4%). Ideally, future studies will include randomized clinical trials to document the effectiveness of RDS in the prevention of COVID-19 in humans. Additional studies will continue to determine if RDS is helpful in alleviating symptoms of acute COVID-19 infection and/or in shortening the course of illness, and decreasing the severity of the infection among those with COVID-19.

4. Conclusions

Employees at this destination resort have had multiple opportunities to participate in wellness initiatives that are based on principles of TCM. Before a vaccination was available to prevent infection with SARS-CoV-2, prevention strategies were limited to social distancing and personal protective equipment. The RDS was embraced by this small sample of the hospitality workforce in the United States. This study demonstrates an acceptance of both Eastern and Western principles of medicine to maintain health during the pre-vaccine, COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1

Effect Experienced	Number of Participants
Increased endurance/energy	35
Better sleep quality	16
Decreased seasonal allergies	13
Better breathing	13
Decreased constipation	9

Effects of the RDS Experienced by Participants

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