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THE HOME ECONOMIST: For business travelers, staying healthy is job 1

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Brett Graff is a reporter & former U.S. government covering the economic forces affecting real people.

Tony Hernandez recently flew back from a business trip to Los Angeles. The CEO of Miami-based Latino Broadcasting Co. travels there periodically for the production of his company's Immigrant Archive Project. And this visit was fairly typical in that he had booked a hotel room at the Sunset Marquis, which not only gave him access to an Equinox gym but also a restaurant serving egg-white omelets and steamed vegetables.

Yet, despite Hernandez's determination to have his fitness routine accompany him out West, once arriving there he didn't dare miss the opportunity to indulge in gin and tonics and the ropa vieja of duck when treating clients to dinner at the city's trendy Asia de Cuba.

"In an industry like mine, there's a lot of entertaining," Hernandez says. "And I don't want to be the guy at the table ordering water and Brussels sprouts when everyone else is having cocktails. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle becomes exponentially more difficult when you travel."

He's not kidding. While business travel has the potential for tremendous money-making opportunities — your client base and professional exposure will multiply — bringing home this bacon can also lead to eating more fat. Health researchers say that road warriors who travel most frequently are more than twice as likely to be obese and report having poor health. Experts say both those factors will later turn costly for employees and their bosses, which is why they highlight some critical lifestyle adjustments we should all make to lower the physical and financial price.

"The individuals who travel the most do the lowest amount of exercise, are more likely to smoke, show higher levels of anxiety and eat more red meat," says Andrew Rundle, an associate professor of epidemiology at Columbia University, who looked at health data for more than 13,000 employed people. "They're more likely to rate themselves as having poor health."

People such as Hernandez, who travel between one and six days a month, are actually the healthiest of all employees, which may be among the reasons they're selected to represent their companies in the first place, Rundle says. But those who hit the road even more — more than two weeks a month — eat a significant number of meals at restaurants, meaning they have much less control over the ingredients they consume. That's an even greater setback when rushing through fast-food filled airports, he says. What's more, air travel is dehydrating and flight times often deprive travelers of the rest they need. "They're all activities associated with higher weight," Rundle says. "But business travel can be done in a healthy way."

First, realize your own body can trick you into overeating, says Tanya Zuckerbrot, a registered dietitian in New York whose client list includes MSNBC personality Donny Deutsch and jewelry entrepreneur Judith Ripka. For starters, sleep deprivation gives us hormonal adjustments, causing our levels of leptin (which helps us feel full) to decline while triggering our levels of ghrelin (which stimulates appetite) to rise, she

explains. At that same time, symptoms of dehydration — feeling shaky or weak — mimic those of hunger. “Sometimes all you need is a zero-calorie nap or a zero-calorie bottle of water.” Zuckerbrot says. “But instead you’ll overeat.”

Make sure your travel preparations involve asking the hotel staff to clear out your mini-bar, Zuckerbrot says. Then board the plane with snacks in your carry-on, choosing items with at least five grams of fiber and less than 200 calories. Once you arrive at your destination, eat energy-producing carbs during the day — not at dinner. And while entertaining clients with alcohol isn’t off limits — a serving of whisky, vodka or gin is a mere 80 calories without any fat or carbs — a low sugar mixer, such as club soda, is key, she says.

“Being a good host has nothing to do with the food in front of you,” Zuckerbrot says. “It’s about being engaging and entertaining. Just because you’re dining on an expense account doesn’t mean the calories are free.”

Quite the contrary, says Dr. Jonathan Spages, who specializes in functional medicine and wrote *The Wellness Approach*. Obesity can lead to high blood pressure, a condition that costs some patients thousands in medication — even when they have health insurance, Spages says. What’s more, being fat can compromise your immune system, which means lower productivity and the potential to blow through sick days and even unpaid leave. And that will cost you promotional opportunities and perhaps your job, Spages says.

“You can’t be on your game if you feel bad,” he says.

Obese employees, meanwhile, subject their companies to the costs of high turnover and more expensive insurance premiums. That’s why Columbia University’s Rundle suggests businesses negotiate lodging discounts exclusively with hotels offering health-promoting amenities, such as the spas and restaurants that broadcasting executive Hernandez covets.

“Companies can use their spending power to do what’s good for their employees,” Rundle says. “And that will also keep their health care costs low.”

*This is a monthly column by Miamiian **Brett Graff**, a former U.S. government economist who writes about how economic forces are affecting real people.*