



Healthy Foods and Beverages

What Approach Is Right for Your Hospital?

Hospitals and other organizations in Kansas and across the country are implementing healthier food and beverage policies and setting nutrition standards for foods and beverages they sell and serve to their employees, guests and the public. A variety of approaches can be used to implement food, beverage and nutrition standards policies. For example, some organizations have chosen to stop selling or providing sugary drinks on their campuses (unless ordered by a clinician), and to apply their nutritional policies to 100 percent of the food sold in their cafeterias, snack foods in vending machines and food served at meetings.

Others have adopted a mixed approach, reducing but not necessarily eliminating sugary drinks, or applying a nutrition standard to only 50 or 75 percent of the food they serve and sell. Another option is to combine these approaches, gradually phasing in higher percentages of healthy foods with the goal of reaching 100 percent (or close to it) over time. Hospitals can use this document to help determine what type of policy or implementation approach might work best for them.

The Special Case of Patient Trays

Food and beverage policies typically treat patient trays differently, to allow for circumstances where a specific type of food or beverage that might not meet the general nutrition standards is ordered by a clinician. Food and beverages ordered by a clinician typically are not counted as part of the 100 percent “healthy foods” policy. If a lower percentage is used, patient trays could be factored into the overall percentage.

TYPES OF POLICIES

100% Healthy Approach

Under this approach, the hospital requires 100 percent of foods and beverages served or sold to non-patients to meet a nutrition standard. This creates a consistent environment throughout the hospital.

In some circumstances, a hospital wishing to implement a 100 percent healthy approach may have barriers due to existing contractual obligations or other considerations. If the barrier is truly insurmountable, a hospital could choose to carve out the problematic outlet from the 100 percent policy, or could use a lower percentage for the hospital as a whole while working toward achieving the 100 percent goal over time as the situation changes.

Other Percentages

With this approach, the hospital sets a specific percentage of healthy foods and beverages that the organization will offer by a certain time. For example, a hospital’s policy could state that as of Jan. 1, some 75 percent of all beverages sold or served to non-patients will be non-sugary drinks. Another option would be to establish a policy that as of June 1, 50 percent of vending machine items will meet nutrition standards. Some institutions use a multi-step implementation approach, increasing the percentage of healthier items offered over time. For example, the hospital may set a goal of achieving 50 percent healthier items in year one, increasing to 75 percent in year two.

100% Healthy or Something Less?

How to Choose

How strong is your nutrition standard?

There are many nutritional standards from which to choose. The strength of the nutrition standard to be used is a key consideration. If the overall standards are more lenient, then a higher percentage should be used. For example, the Chicago Park District’s vending machine nutrition standards are less stringent than some others, but they apply to 100 percent of the food sold. Some institutional beverage policies do not include artificially-sweetened beverages as “healthy,” but require only 80 percent of beverages purchased by the institution to be “healthy,” allocating “diet” beverages to the 20 percent margin.

Should you treat food and drinks the same?

If taking a less than 100 percent healthy approach, hospitals should use a percentage that will result in measureable improvement in the nutritional quality of the food and beverage environment. In particular, it makes sense to have separate standards for beverages versus food.

A recent national survey of foods and beverages in vending machines on state and local government property found that on average, about 42 percent of beverages in these settings were healthier beverages (water, “diet” soda and 100 percent juice), but only 5 percent of the food

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100% Healthy or Something Less? How to Choose

products were healthy (fruits, vegetables and nuts). Given this finding, a vending standard of less than 50 percent healthy for beverages makes little sense because it would simply maintain the status quo. However, a lower standard for food could make a significant improvement.

Lumping food and beverages together using one standard – such as, 75 percent of all food and beverages combined will meet the standard – should be avoided. Combining foods and drinks this way makes it easy to meet the standard by using water and “diet” beverages without making meaningful change in the nutritional quality of food products.

How much time and resources do you have for monitoring and enforcement?

Different kinds of monitoring efforts are required depending on the approach taken. In moving to a 100 percent “healthy” standard, most organizations do a lot of educational activities, including taste tests, as part of the initial implementation. But once the policy is rolled out, those activities can become occasional.

By contrast, a less than 100 percent “healthy” standard typically requires sustained effort to implement it effectively. The product mix needs to be monitored regularly to make sure the policy is being followed, and marketing strategies to promote purchases of the healthier options must be used on an ongoing basis. For

example, common marketing practices could include increasing the price of less healthy foods relative to the healthier options, making sure the healthier foods or drinks are positioned at eye level or in the prime purchasing positions, and maintaining signage or labels to identify healthier options. Ongoing activities such as sampling events, and sustained educational campaigns and messaging to promote continued awareness of the healthier options, also are important. For policies with less than 100 percent “healthy” standards, these types of activities are needed to ensure proper implementation and to help maintain their impact by encouraging consumers to choose the healthier products.

Are there vendor contracts that create challenges?

Many organizations have contractual and financial relationships with food and beverage vendors that will impact implementation of a nutrition policy, and may affect the hospital's



ability to apply a policy to a specific type of outlet. Existing contracts should be reviewed; they may provide flexibility to substitute healthier alternatives. Vendors increasingly are recognizing that customers value healthy products, and may be willing to work with organizations beyond what the contract requires.

The implementation plan should allow adequate time for vendor partners to transition products and acclimate customers to the changes and for the hospital to conduct educational and promotional activities with various target audiences. Depending upon the contract provisions and the vendor's capacity to provide products that meet the institution's needs and priorities, hospitals may choose to re-bid the contract and build healthy food and beverage policies into the request for proposals and contract language.

Are there different revenue impacts?

The impact of a policy change on revenue seems to depend more on how the policy is implemented, and not on whether the policy is 100 percent healthy or something less. Institutions that have used a 100 percent “healthy” standard have experienced gains in sales and revenue; institutions that have used a mixed approach have experienced losses, and vice versa. The overall impact on the hospital's revenue stream may vary depending on whether smart marketing strategies are used, and how and where the profits are designated. Typically, any sales declines are a short-term issue, if they occur at all, regardless of the approach. Many hospitals take the position that regardless of hypothetical concerns about negative sales impacts, creating a healthy food and beverage environment is simply the right thing to do.

Ultimately, hospitals and health care systems will make their decisions based on an individualized assessment of all of the considerations described above. A sound implementation plan and good communication are key to helping the hospital successfully launch healthier food and beverage policies.

The Kansas Hospital Education and Research Foundation of the Kansas Hospital Association has created a series of resources designed to inform and support efforts to promote healthy food and beverage environments in Kansas hospitals. The Public Health Law Center assisted in creating this document. These resources are funded by the Kansas Health Foundation. For more information, visit the Healthy Kansas Hospitals website at www.HealthyKansasHospitals.org.

100% Healthy or Something Else?

Pro's and Con's

100% Healthy Approach

Advantages

- Offers a clear and straightforward policy that is easy to understand and monitor.
- Makes a bold statement underscoring the importance of a healthy food and beverage environment.
- Produces significant positive public relations benefits by positioning the hospital as a model for the community, staff and patients.
- Less complicated to maintain over time – does not require constant monitoring and tracking each month to ensure adherence to the policy. For example, it does not require a continual calculation of the percentage of sugary drinks being stocked in the vending machines throughout the hospital.
- Promotes social norm change around what is a healthy food and beverage environment.
- Encourages behavior changes that are likely to produce improved health outcomes and lower workforce health care costs.
- Provides more food and beverage choices for staff and visitors who want healthy options.

Disadvantages

- Some staff initially may be resistant, especially if one of their favorite foods or beverages will no longer be available on-site.
- May be difficult to implement initially due to required contract changes and renegotiations that are complex and time consuming.
- Creates possible additional costs related to beverage and food equipment changes.
- Limits choices for patients who request a sugary drink for non-medical reasons.

Less than 100% Approaches

Advantages

- Supports a gradual transition to healthier foods and beverages, encouraging staff to change their habits and taste preferences.
- Reduces the level of initial resistance and complaints by employees and other dedicated customers.
- Preserves the opportunity for customers to choose products that probably are not healthy, but are appealing for other reasons.
- Makes a positive statement about promoting a healthy nutrition environment, but does not impose an absolute.
- Provides additional flexibility to allow time to modify contracts, renegotiate provisions, issue new contract bids and change other financial agreements.

Disadvantages

- Requires regular monitoring across all food outlets to ensure proper product mix is being offered, that products are placed in appropriate positions, that labeling and educational signage is properly placed and maintained, etc.
- Requires more complicated tracking – 75 percent healthy food purchases by the hospital may not necessarily result in 75 percent of healthy food sales to customers.
- Limits health impact because foods of little or no nutritional value still are available at the hospital.
- Undermines clinical messages about the importance of healthy eating behaviors.
- Slows norm change around healthy food and beverage environments.
- Mitigates health improvement outcomes and workforce health care cost savings.