Cafeterias

Many working adults find it difficult to make time for healthy eating. The workplace cafeteria is an excellent place to promote healthy eating habits by ensuring the food provided to employees is nutritious.

There are several environmental factors that influence employee food choices such as the availability of healthy and less healthy choices, the taste and price of available foods, portion sizes, marketing and advertising, and the convenience of available options. Often attempts to promote healthier items are unsuccessful because only one aspect is addressed such as making healthier foods available without considering placement, pricing, promotion, convenience or taste. Ideally, all of these aspects will be addressed to promote healthy eating in your workplace.

Definitions of Success

✓ At least 80 per cent of foods come from the "Maximum Nutritional Value" and "Sell/Offer Most" categories*
✓ Foods from the "Sell/Offer Less" categories are limited to 20 per cent or less*
✓ Foods from the "Not Recommended" category are not offered*
✓ Meals include three of the four Food Groups from Canada’s Food Guide**
✓ Price, placement and promotion and used to market healthier foods
✓ Foods and beverages offered are culturally acceptable
✓ Eating area is clean and pleasant with adequate seating
✓ Local and/or organic food is used whenever possible
✓ Food service employees have food safety training
✓ Food service operations are as energy efficient as possible

*See the Nutrition Standards in Appendix A for a description of food categories.
**Please visit http://healthcanada.gc.ca/foodguide for a copy of Canada’s Food Guide
1.0 Needs Assessment

A cafeteria needs assessment can take many forms, including surveys or focus groups with employees to identify their needs and interests. The assessment should also include information from cafeteria managers and personnel about the operations of the cafeteria and suggestions they have for improvements.

Assess the current cafeteria operations and identify both positive and negative aspects of the service in terms of promoting healthy eating.

Identify training needs, as skills vary widely among food service personnel (e.g., training on food preparation techniques, food presentation, marketing and customer service).

For more information on assessing needs in your workplace see page 76 in the ‘Getting Started’ section.

2.0 Evaluation Indicators

Tracking indicators will help to determine if there have been positive changes in the promotion of healthy foods in the cafeteria. Identify relevant indicators in your cafeteria and monitor them before, during and after your interventions.

Some possible indicators include:

- The percentage of food that is available for sale from the “Maximum Nutritional Value”, “Sell/Offer Most”, “Sell/Offer Less” and “Not Recommended” categories
- Cafeteria sales (e.g., sales of healthy meal specials, salads etc. at the point of purchase through cash register sales or number of portions sold.)
- If meals include three of the four Food Groups from Canada’s Food Guide
- Healthier foods are promoted, priced competitively, and placed in convenient locations
- If foods and beverages offered are acceptable to various cultures in the workplace
- The number of food service employees that have food safety training
- Food safety reports from Public Health Inspectors
- Monitoring to ensure employees have a clean, pleasant eating area
- The percentage of local and/or organic foods that are purchased for the cafeteria
- The environmental impacts of food service operations (e.g., waste reduction, energy use)
- Employee satisfaction with cafeteria food services (e.g., taste, price, quality, convenience)
- Note barriers, challenges and successes in the implementation process
- Any other relevant indicators
3.0 Creating a Healthy Cafeteria

3.1 Improve the Nutritional Content of Available Foods

Ensure meals meet Canada’s Food Guide recommendations

Most meals do not follow current Canada’s Food Guide recommendations. In order to promote healthy eating habits, the food offered in the cafeteria should meet Canada’s Food Guide recommendations. This can be achieved using the Nutrition Standards in Appendix A. Using a nutrition standard ensures that foods offered in the cafeteria are: part of Canada’s Food Guide, higher in nutrients such as vitamins, minerals and fibre, and contain little or no added fat, sugar or salt.

Workplaces should aim to serve the majority of foods from the “Maximum Nutritional Value” and “Sell/Offer Most” categories (e.g., 80 per cent of foods offered should come from these categories), with an emphasis on “Maximum Nutritional Value” foods. Foods from the “Sell/Offer Less” category should be limited (e.g., to 20 per cent or less). Additionally, workplaces should avoid offering foods from the “Not Recommended” category.

Assess the foods available in the cafeteria using the Nutrition Standards in Appendix A (use this information as your baseline data). Then, work with your food service provider to make changes to the nutritional content of foods offered to employees. The changes can be implemented all at once or phased in over time.

Success Stories: IMPROVING NUTRITIONAL QUALITY

“Chevron’s food service vendor has a “stealth health” philosophy: it uses quality ingredients and few highly processed foods to offer menu items that delight rather than require sacrifice. Instead of seeing a daily “healthy entrée,” employees choose from an array of appetizing healthful options, such as meatloaf made with whole grains and low-sodium soups made from scratch.”\(^1\)

An intervention at a truck stop had positive effects on driver’s food habits by providing training for food service workers on healthy food preparation techniques.\(^2\) As an added bonus, the food service operator actually saved money using lower-fat cooking methods.\(^2\)
Ways to help employees meet Canada’s Food Guide recommendations

- Plan cafeteria meals so they contain three of the four Food Groups from Canada’s Food Guide. Ensure that half of the plate is from the Vegetables and Fruit Food Group, one quarter of the plate is from the Grain Products Food Group and one quarter of the plate is from the Meat and Alternatives Food Group.

- Add more vegetables (chopped or pureed) to casseroles, pasta dishes, mixed recipes and sandwich fillings. Serve all specials or meals with salads, raw or cooked vegetables or whole or canned unsweetened fruit as sides. Add vegetable or fruit garnishes to sandwiches such as grated carrots or slices of fresh fruit.

- Reformulate existing food products (i.e., reduce the amount of added fat, salt or sugar used or add more vegetables to the recipe) Reduce or remove energy dense ingredients used in recipes such as cheese, cream, butter, margarine, oils, mayonnaise, salad dressings, higher fat meats, and sugar. Substitute some high fat ingredients such as beef with low energy-density ingredients such as mushrooms (e.g., casseroles, stews, chilli, and pizza) Mix onion, celery, oats and other vegetables in ground meat dishes (e.g., meatballs, meatloaf).

- Use low fat cooking methods such as grilling, baking, stir-frying, microwaving, steaming, roasting, sautéing, toasting and barbequing.

- Look for the healthiest ingredients. For example, use low-fat mayonnaise in recipes or low-salt canned products, sauces, breads, etc.

- Serve sauces, dressings and gravies in small portions, on the side.

- Offer smaller servings of grain products such as thin crust on pizzas, small pitas, tortillas, wraps and breads.

- Remove less healthy drinks, desserts and sides and replace them with healthier tasty options (e.g., fruit salads for dessert instead of cake or baked goods).

- Sell sliced fruit or vegetables—such as slices of melon or carrot sticks in convenient snack sizes (e.g. 100 g).

- Serve vegetarian meals more often (e.g., once or twice a week). Get inspiration from ethnic cuisine (e.g., Asian dishes) that typically focus on vegetables.

Success Story: IMPROVING NUTRITIONAL QUALITY

Railroad operator, Union Pacific Corp, made a request to their cafeteria operator to cut the fat and calories on every menu item by 10%.
3.2 Taste

Taste can be highly subjective and in some cases, labeling a food as ‘healthy’ causes assumptions of poor taste (e.g., low-fat, light, or foods that mention they contain ‘healthy’ ingredients such as soy).5,10-13

- When working with populations that are less health oriented, focus on other positive and enjoyable features of healthy foods such as freshness or locally grown foods
- Use appealing descriptive terms in food names, for example, “rich”, “spicy”, “home made”, “chunky” or “traditional”12
- The more often a food is tasted the more it is liked.10 If at first the employees do not like the new food items, keep trying, as they may eventually be accepted, especially if they are coupled with well-liked food items
- Try offering free samples when introducing new foods in the cafeteria

3.3 Price

Consumers tend to purchase items that they consider to be reasonably priced. Therefore, healthy foods must be priced competitively (i.e. the same or less than other options).5,10,13-22

- Consider increasing the price of less healthy items (if they are available), to subsidize the price of healthier items such as vegetables and fruit

**Success stories: WORKPLACE CAFETERIA PRICING STRATEGIES**

Between 7-10% of corporate cafeterias run by food service company Sodexho, use pricing strategies to encourage healthy eating. These include increasing the price of fatty foods and using the extra money to subsidize the cost of healthy sandwiches, cut fruit and salads.9

L.L Bean increased the price of burgers and lowered the price for salads. As a result, fruit and salad sales doubled while french fry and burger sales fell by half.9

Humana Inc. subsidizes the sale of healthy items so they can be offered at a discount to employees. When the subsidy was introduced, sales increased by 19 per cent, completely offsetting the cost of the subsidy.23
3.3 Promotion

Marketing can be used to influence employee food choices by offering incentives to eat healthier foods or by using visual prompts that can nudge employees towards making healthier choices.

- Avoid promoting less healthy items, (e.g., “Sell/Offer Less” or “Not Recommended”) such as “buy 10, get one free muffin”. Instead, use this type of promotion to encourage the consumption of healthier items.
- Remove advertisements for foods from the “Sell/Offer Less” or “Not Recommended” categories.
- Use point-of-decision prompts such as logos, nutrition labels and messaging (e.g., posters, glass-clings, tent cards, etc.) to highlight healthier choices in the cafeteria. See page 103 for more information on point-of-decision prompts.

3.4 Placement

Healthy foods must be as convenient as other choices to encourage consumption.\(^5,14,22,24\)

- Examine the traffic flow of the cafeteria, to ensure that healthy items are the most convenient to purchase and that they do not take more time and effort to obtain.
- Typically less healthy foods such as food from the “Not Recommended” category are placed at the register, which is considered to be an influential location. Replace these with healthier options. Sales of healthier items can also be increased by placing them at eye level.\(^25\)
- Most consumers will make selections that are visible on the menu, rather than asking for alternatives.\(^26\) Ensure that the healthiest options are highly visible on the menu. Consider not offering other options on the menu board.
- Consider making the healthier versions the default options for food, especially if consumers have the option of asking for a variation if they desire. For example, make pre-made sandwiches on whole grain bread instead of white. Employees always have the option of making a special request for white bread instead.
- Offer employees a salad or steamed vegetables with their entrée and avoid prompting to make less healthy choices.
Healthy Dinner Program

Many working adults find it difficult to manage time constraints related to work making convenient access to healthy options especially important.27 Forty-one percent of Canadians feel that their life is so hectic that they find it hard to include healthy food options on a daily basis.28

As a result of time constraints, many people rely on convenience foods (e.g., pre-packaged and frozen meals) and foods purchased away from home (e.g., fast food, take-out, and restaurant meals) instead of preparing meals for themselves.27 Other factors such as lack of food skills and living in a single person household also increase the use of convenience foods and foods eaten away from home.28-30

Eating foods prepared outside the home have been shown to be lower in nutritional quality compared to foods prepared at home.31-33 Eating dinner away from home just once per week, has been related to significantly higher biomarkers for cardiovascular disease as well as an increased risk for becoming overweight or obese.33

Therefore, some employees may benefit from a healthy meal take-away dinner program.30 A healthy dinner program allows employees to pre-order dinner from the cafeteria for pick up on their way home. Meals should meet the criteria for “Maximum Nutritional Value” or “Sell/Offer Most.”

One study examined the effects of a workplace hot meal take-away program and showed that vegetable and fruit intakes were higher on days that workers ate meals prepared by this service.34

A meal take-away program can also provide extra revenue for your food service operator.

**Success Story: MORSELS CAFÉ IN CAMBRIDGE ONTARIO**

Morsels Café offers a *Dinner Home* program, where office workers can take home a nutritious meal for four. Each day the café offers a take-home dinner consisting of a meat and starch, while customers have a choice of vegetable or salad to have with their meal. The portion sizes are based on *Canada’s Food Guide* and healthy ingredients are used in each recipe.
3.5 Portion Size

Food is being consumed away from home more often, which is associated with increased portion sizes, leading to an increase in total energy intake.6,10,35-40 People served larger portions eat more food, as the amount served is an indicator that it is an appropriate amount to consume.25,37,38,41

Food service establishments can positively influence consumer health by serving appropriate portion sizes.38,42-44

Strategies to Reduce Portion Sizes

- Align portion sizes to those recommended in Canada’s Food Guide
- If foods categorized as “Sell/Offer Less” or “Not Recommended” are available in your cafeteria, ensure that the portion sizes are as small as possible
- Allow individuals to purchase half-portion sizes on request and price these accordingly (i.e., it should cost half as much)
- Consumers tend to avoid extremes (i.e. if small, medium and large are offered, most people choose the medium size).41 Avoid removing the smallest size if it does not sell well (i.e., 250 ml or 8 oz) otherwise it may prompt people to choose even larger portion sizes
- Assess the size of serving dishes, glasses and take out containers used in the cafeteria, as people tend to use these items as consumption guidelines.25 Use smaller dishes and containers in the cafeteria to reduce portion sizes (i.e., rather than giving smaller portions in large containers, which may result in customers feeling deprived). For example, serving plates should be no larger than 23 cm (nine inches) in diameter
3.6 Culturally Appropriate Foods

Waterloo Region is culturally diverse with almost 25 per cent of the population coming from other countries. Individuals from other countries or those who practice certain religions may have special dietary needs. Workplaces should be considerate of the diverse needs of the workplace population and make sure that employees have access to foods that are conducive to traditional eating patterns.

- Add extra choices when food is offered to employees (e.g., offering soy milk in addition to cow’s milk or offering vegetarian options). Workplaces may also wish to serve some ethnic cuisines to increase the variety of foods offered in the cafeteria.
- Make ingredient lists available upon request.
- Assess if employees have any special dietary needs during the needs assessment process. For more information see page 76 of the ‘Getting Started’ section.

3.7 Purchasing Local and Organic Foods

- Locally produced foods are not necessarily farmed using organic farming methods. You may want to use both local and organic criteria for food purchasing at your facility.
- Explore with your food service providers if it is possible to supply a specified percentage of locally sourced and/or organic food for use in cafeterias, caterings and events.
- You may not be able to replace all of your current food purchases with local/organic foods. However, you can augment the foods that you currently purchase with local and/or organic products.
- Consider the capacity of current food services staff to process fresh foods. For example if potatoes currently come peeled and chopped, extra staff time will be needed to use fresh unprocessed foods.
- Buy fresh local produce when in season. This may also require some careful menu planning to ensure that ingredients correspond to seasonal availability. Other items such as meat, eggs and milk may be purchased locally year round.

3.8 Pleasant Eating Area

- Provide a clean, quite, bright space that is away from the workspace.
- Ensure there is adequate seating and a clean surface to place food to allow for comfortable dining.
- Avoid conducting business meetings and events in the eating area during meal times to allow employees to relax during their lunch break.
- Provide adequate waste, recycling and organics bins and ensure these are kept clean.
3.9 Preventing Foodborne illness

Foodborne illnesses are caused by ingesting bacteria, viruses, or other parasitic organisms in contaminated food or water. It is estimated that there are between 11 million and 13 million cases of food related illness in Canada every year.\(^46\)

Employers should ensure that food offered to employees is handled appropriately to reduce the incidence of food borne illness.

Ways to Reduce the Incidence of Foodborne Illness in Cafeterias

**Hand Washing**
- Educate all food service workers on proper hand washing techniques
- Make sure that food service employees have access to proper hand washing facilities and that sinks are in a convenient location to encourage use
- Put up hand washing signs in food service areas to prompt employees to wash their hands

**Food Safety Training**
- Provide food safety training for food service staff. Food service operators with at least one full-time staff completing food safety training, tend to have better food safety inspection scores compared to operators with no certified staff members.\(^47\) Food safety training is offered at Conestoga College: [http://www.conestogac.on.ca](http://www.conestogac.on.ca)

**Management Responsibilities**
- Monitor employees to make sure they are washing their hands appropriately and using safe food handling techniques
- Encourage employees to stay home when they are sick to prevent the transmission of illness to customers and other employees. Individuals with symptoms such as vomiting, diarrhea, fever, or sore throat should not have contact with any food or food preparation areas, as they may spread illnesses\(^48\)
- Set up a daily schedule for cleaning equipment, appliances and surfaces and regularly checking equipment such as refrigerators, freezers and dishwashers to make sure they are functioning properly

**Tools: FOOD SAFETY**

3.10 Environmentally Friendly Approaches to Food Services

Any reduction in energy use or food waste is a positive step to becoming environmentally friendly. Here are some suggestions to help your cafeteria to “go green”:

Equipment and Facilities

- Whenever possible purchase Energy Star® appliances. This will also give off less heat which may also reduce air conditioning costs.
- Use energy efficient light bulbs where applicable and turn off lights when they are not needed.
- Turn off equipment when it is not in use.
- Use full loads in oven and dishwashers whenever possible.
- Ensure equipment is routinely maintained to keep it running properly.

Waste Management

- Look for concentrated products that require less packaging.
- Use reusable plates, cups, glasses and cutlery instead of disposables.
- Divide waste into organics, recyclables, and waste.
- Request that suppliers offer products that have less packaging.
- Buy in bulk when possible to reduce packaging or use reusable bins to transport items (e.g., milk crates).

Non-food Products

- Use less toxic cleaners and soaps when available. Look for products that are biodegradable.
- Reduce the amount of paper used by reducing printing or using double sided printing. If this is not possible use recycled paper products.

Food Products

- Purchase products that are grown, locally – to reduce transportation, and grown sustainably or organically to reduce pesticide use and to protect the environment.
- Use seasonal menus to incorporate produce that is available locally.
- Reduce the frequency of offering animal-based protein foods and offer smaller portion sizes. This is not only advantageous from a nutritional perspective, but reduces greenhouse gas emissions. For example, it requires 40 kcal of fossil fuel based energy to produce 1 kcal of beef, 14 kcal to produce 1 kcal of pork and 10 kcal to produce 1 kcal of poultry. However, it only requires 2.2 kcal of energy to produce 1 kcal of plant proteins. Offer more vegetarian, poultry, pork and fish choices and reduce beef choices overall to reduce carbon emissions.
- Use fish products that are environmentally sustainable. For more information see the resource: A guide to eating fish for women, children and families:
Cafeteria References


38. Rolls BJ, Roe LS, Meengs JS. Larger portion sizes lead to a sustained increase in energy intake over 2 days. *J Am Diet Assoc*. 2006;106:543-549.


