Common Areas

In many workplaces, employees bring in 'treats' for co-workers to share. Leftover food from meetings and events is often placed in common areas for people to consume. Additionally, fundraisers based on selling “Foods to Limit” (e.g., cakes, pastries, candies, chocolate, cookies, granola bars, ice cream, doughnuts, muffins, french fries, potato chips, salty snacks and sweetened hot and cold beverages) are typically placed in common areas for people to purchase. Candy dishes on desks are also an example of food offered in common areas.

“Corporate break rooms need not become repositories for unused Halloween candy and holiday leftovers”.

Definition of Success

- Common areas in workspaces are free from food
- Employees have been educated on the influence of food in the environment and have accepted the decision to reduce and/or eliminate food in common areas
1.0 Needs Assessment

To determine if this is a priority area for your workplace, ask employees about their personal barriers to healthy eating. If employees indicate that they have difficulty resisting tempting food when present, it may be worthwhile to address this issue.

2.0 Evaluation Indicators

You will know if efforts have been effective if there is less food left in common areas. This can be periodically monitored throughout the year to see if behaviour changes have been maintained.

3.0 Addressing Food in Common Areas

Having the occasional less-than-healthy snack is not going to make or break the health of an employee. However, the calorie margin for ‘treats’ is very small (e.g., 100 kcal per day)³ This is roughly the equivalent of one cookie, 250 ml of soda, 10 jellybeans or 5 chocolate covered almonds.⁴ Daily consumption of these types of food and beverages is enough to cause employees to develop chronic health problems over time.

Employees may enjoy having access to food in common areas or dread the thought of having to avoid eating when tempting foods are available. However, it is possible that employees may resent being told that they are not permitted to bring ‘treats’ to work. Many people believe that each individual’s self-restraint is strong enough to resist temptation (i.e., “the people who do not want to eat it can simply make that ‘choice’”).⁵

However, the food that surrounds individuals predicts what they will consume. Evidence suggests that people who live in homes with many high-fat and high-sugar foods eat more of these foods.⁹ Foods high in fat, sugar or white flour act in the brain a similar way to addictive drugs such as cocaine, which makes them very tempting and difficult for people to resist.⁶⁻¹³

Food for Thought: OUT OF SIGHT

In one experiment, office workers ate 3.1 more chocolates when they were placed in transparent jars on their desks compared to when the chocolates were in opaque jars.¹⁴

The bottom line: Seeing food causes eating.
The presence of less healthy food and beverages can be extremely distracting for workers. There is evidence that individuals have difficulty doing more than one task requiring self-control at a time.\textsuperscript{15-18} This creates a scenario where people exposed to tempting food in their work areas will either eat the ‘treat’ and get on with their work (potentially increasing diet related health risks) or try to resist to maintain their health, resulting in distracted and less productive employees. One experiment showed that people trying to do a math quiz while having to resist cookies were less than half as productive as people who did not have to resist cookies.\textsuperscript{14} Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that people who resist initially, eventually have a breakdown in self-control at a later point in the day, so employees may feel deprived from resisting ‘treats’ at work and give-in later in the day when they get home.\textsuperscript{15} Having regular access to food in the work area may also create a habit of rewarding oneself to cope with boredom or stress in the workplace.\textsuperscript{19,20}

Bringing in food to share with others may be a profoundly personal issue for some employees and addressing this issue requires a ‘cultural shift’ within the workplace. Be considerate of employee’s feelings and beliefs when addressing this particular concern. To decrease resistance to the suggestion of minimizing or eliminating food in common areas, have a discussion with employees to gauge their readiness to make changes. If employees are resistant to the idea, they may benefit from education on how the food environment impacts individual food choices.\textsuperscript{21-23}

If employees are agreeable to the idea of minimizing or eliminating food in common areas, it may be enough to have an understanding among employees. In this case, there is no responsibility for ensuring that employees stick to the agreement, however, it may be the most acceptable solution among the employees.

Policy

If the workplace feels strongly that the practice of offering food in common areas is unacceptable, a policy could be considered. For more information, see the section on policy development. Example policies are available on page 178.
Common Areas References