

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

CURING HOSPITAL FOOD

By Sharon Palmer, RD

Along with airplane food, hospital food has been the butt of jokes for years. Today, it's not just the cold, tasteless meals people are complaining about. In a haven for restoring health, consumers expect healthy food, both for their bodies and the environment. That means less processed and deep-fried foods and more whole, local, organic foods rolling out of the hospital's kitchen doors.

Unhealthy Hospital Food

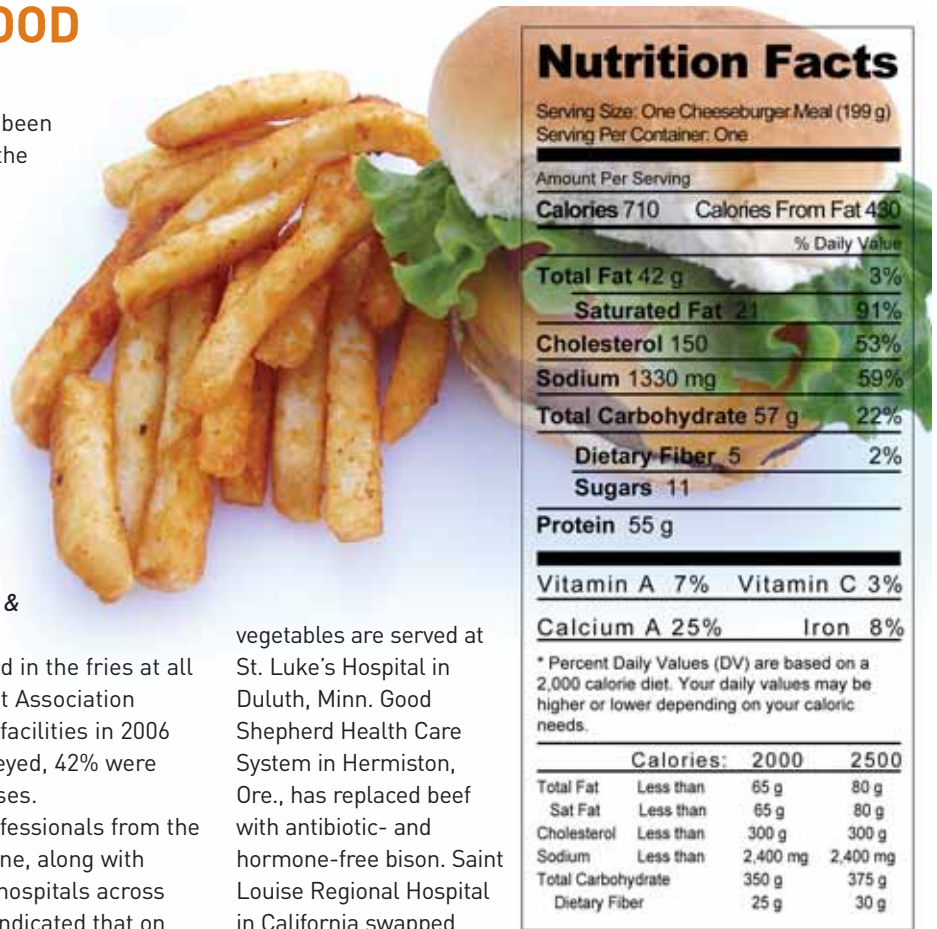
Yes, hospitals have a long way to go when it comes to serving up healthy food. The Center for Science in the Public Interest tested French fries from 14 of the top 16 hospitals with Honor Roll status in *U.S. News & World Report's* rankings and six leading children's hospitals in 2006. Trans fats were found in the fries at all 20 institutions. The American Medical Student Association conducted a survey of fast food in healthcare facilities in 2006 and discovered that of the 234 hospitals surveyed, 42% were selling brand-name fast food on their campuses.

In a 2005 survey conducted by nutrition professionals from the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, along with ADInfinitem, Inc., menus and foods served in hospitals across the country were studied. The survey results indicated that on many days at some hospitals, customers will not find a single low-fat, cholesterol-free entrée in the main dining area. Many entrées described as healthful were actually very high in fat. And less than one third of hospitals surveyed offered either a daily salad bar or a daily low-fat vegetarian entrée.

Hospitals Leading the Way to Healthy

The good news is that there's a socially aware hospital food movement in the air, with some hospitals leading the way to a healthier food system. A detailed nutrition statement and call to action was developed by the University of Arizona College of Medicine's Program in Integrative Medicine and The Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine of Columbia University College of Physicians & Surgeons.

Kaiser Permanente, the country's largest nonprofit health system, has gotten positive press for instituting weekly farmers' markets at many of its hospitals. Norfolk General Hospital and Norfolk Hospital Nursing Home in Ontario had their waste minimization efforts recognized by the Recycling Council of Ontario and received the Outstanding Achievement in Energy Management Award given by the Task Force on Energy Management in Health Care Facilities in Canada. It also developed a new waterless Medical Air and Medical Vacuum system that reduces energy demand and eliminates the use of water. Organic fruits and



vegetables are served at St. Luke's Hospital in Duluth, Minn. Good Shepherd Health Care System in Hermiston, Ore., has replaced beef with antibiotic- and hormone-free bison. Saint Louise Regional Hospital in California swapped frozen-concentrate coffee

with fresh-brewed, certified fair trade coffee.

And this is just a taste of what's to come in hospital food-service departments across the United States.

Health Care Without Harm

One organization helping to pave the way to a model health-care system is Health Care Without Harm (HCWH), a global coalition of 443 organizations in 52 countries that works to protect public health and the environment within the healthcare industry. Healthy Food in Health Care is a campaign within HCWH. "HCWH realizes that a food system—how food is grown, transported, processed, and prepared—affects health. Hospitals have the opportunity to redefine healthy food in healthcare beyond the nutritional value to include the human and environmental health consequences of how food is grown and raised. HCWH is working with over 100 hospitals nationally to address these issues—procuring local/organic produce, nontherapeutic use of antibiotics in meat, milk without recombinant bovine growth hormone [rBGH], reducing waste through composting, and developing hospital food policies," says Holly Freishtat, food media coordinator at HCWH and Food and Society Policy Fellow.

Many healthcare organizations are getting behind such measures. For example, more than 300 organizations, including the

Healthy Food in Health Care Pledge

We pledge to:

Work with local farmers, community-based organizations, and food suppliers to increase the availability of locally sourced food.

Encourage our vendors and/or food management companies to supply us with food that is, among other attributes, produced without synthetic pesticides and hormones or antibiotics given to animals in the absence of diagnosed disease and which supports farmer health and welfare and ecologically protective and restorative agriculture.

Implement a stepwise program to identify and adopt sustainable food procurement. Begin where fewer barriers exist and immediate steps can be taken. For example, the adoption of rBGH-free milk, fair trade coffee, or introduction of organic fresh fruit in the cafeteria.

Communicate to our Group Purchasing Organizations our interest in foods that are identified as local and certified.

Educate and communicate within our system and to our patients and community about our nutritious, socially just, and ecological sustainable healthy food practices and procedures.

Minimize or beneficially reuse food waste and support the use of food packaging and products which are ecologically protective.

Develop a program to promote and source from producers and processors which uphold the dignity of family, farmers, workers, and their communities and support sustainable and humane agriculture systems.

Report annually on implementation of this Pledge.

— SOURCE: HEALTH CARE WITHOUT HARM, THE HEALTHY FOOD IN HEALTH CARE PLEDGE (WWW.NOHARM.ORG/US/FOOD/PLEDGE)

American Medical Association and the American Public Health Association, have advocated ending the nontherapeutic use of medically important antibiotics as feed additives.

Kick-start Your Commitment to Healthy Food


Healthy Food in Health Care helps healthcare organizations get moving toward a healthier, more sustainable foodservice. Its Web site (www.healthyfoodinhealthcare.org) has valuable resources to get you started—from purchasing guidelines to success stories. Freishtat says you can get your hospital moving in the right direction by signing the Healthy Food in Health Care Pledge (shown above), which fosters a commitment to support local, organic agriculture; minimize waste; and educate the community about a healthier, sustainable food system. “Dietitians can play a leadership role in creating a team within their facility that includes foodservice directors, physicians, marketing staff, and nurses to address these issues and sign the pledge,” explains Freishtat.

“Hospitals are beginning to change the culture of food in their facilities through farmers’ markets on hospital grounds, community-supported agriculture boxes for employees, and through developing overarching food policies,” says Freishtat. You can establish numerous activities within your hospital, including a hospital wellness and recycling program, pulling deep-fat fryers out of the kitchen, cleaning out the vending machines, and changing purchasing contracts. Some steps are quite easy—it’s a simple fix to make a switch to rBGH-free milk. In committing to healthy, sustainable food, it doesn’t hurt that hospitals can also bask in the positive glow of the green healthcare buzz.

“I would like to engage the dietetics community to be leaders in the hospital to define healthy, sustainable food,” says Freishtat. “The access point is fruits and vegetables and eating foods that taste great. Eating a tomato ripe and in season inspires more consumption of fruits and vegetables.”

Let’s see—switching deep-fat fryers for seasonal produce. What are you waiting for?

— Sharon Palmer, RD, is a contributing editor at *Today’s Dietitian* and a freelance food and nutrition writer in southern California.



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