

# Healthy Food in Health Care

## A Menu of Options

Current food production and distribution systems have wide ranging impacts on the quality of ecosystems and their communities. For example, pesticides, large animal feedlot operations and fertilizer overuse pollute our air and water. Agriculture related occupational health and socio-economic impacts to rural communities resulting from the decline of family farms are a growing concern. And as the quantity of calories, fat, salt, sweeteners, and meat and dairy products is increased in our food supply and quantity of vegetables and grains decreased, nutrition suffers.

Hospitals and health systems have opportunities to help prevent these and other food-related health concerns by modeling good nutrition in their institutions and by influencing how food is produced and distributed. Through its food purchasing decisions, the U.S. health care industry can promote health by providing more fresh, good tasting, nutritious food choices for patients, staff and the community. And by supporting food production that is local, humane and protective of the environment and health, health care providers can lead the way in helping redefine health food.

A variety of health care institutions across the U.S. have begun to adopt programs, practices and policies to support a healthy food system. Following their model your facility can choose one, a few or all of the recommendations in this menu to improve the quality of your food choices!

### **1. Start a conversation about healthy food.**

The health care industry is beginning to recognize that healthy food is defined not only by nutritional quality, but how and where it is raised, grown, processed and distributed. As with any other successful initiative, a food program requires a multi-disciplinary team including food and nutrition services, purchasing, administration, nursing and clinicians. Other potential members include public affairs, ethics and quality improvement. Consider the development of a food “team,” which explores the new understanding of healthy food and how your institution or system can get involved.

### **2. Contract with a GPO, Distributor or Food Service Provider that Supports Healthy Food**

The quality of food available within health care facilities is significantly influenced by Group Purchasing Organizations (GPOs), food distributors, food service providers and other outside entities. While it is always important to communicate your interests, contract renewal is an opportune time to identify those businesses that can best help you achieve your goals for serving patients and staff nutritious, local and sustainably produced foods. For example, facilities can use the contracting process to distinguish which food service contractors develop seasonal menus to support local and fresh produce. Health systems can contract with those GPOs that not only source, but support sustainable food options for their member facilities. Similarly, health systems and GPOs can require distributors to fit the unique needs of a facility's healthy food program. For example, electronic distributor

catalogues might be tailored to screen out products such as highly processed foods and meats raised with non-therapeutic antibiotics. Alternatively, they might be designed to allow a facility to search for desired criteria such as local, seasonal or Organic, Fair-Trade, Food Alliance and other certified foods. Purchasing tools are available on the HCWH website at [www.hcwh.org/us/food/issue](http://www.hcwh.org/us/food/issue).

### 3. Institute purchasing policies for meat and poultry raised without non-therapeutic antibiotics.

Antibiotic resistant bacteria are an increasing concern to health care professionals. The scientific consensus is that antibiotic overuse in food animals contributes to resistance transmitted to humans. It is estimated that approximately 70% of all antibiotics are given to animals for non-therapeutic purposes to promote growth or to prevent infections common in industrialized and confined livestock and poultry facilities.

Your health care institution can contribute to the solution of reducing antibiotic overuse by buying meat raised without the use of non-therapeutic antibiotics. Working with your Group Purchasing Organization (GPO), express a preference for buying meats produced without antibiotic feed additives given to animals in the absence of diagnosed disease. Chicken produced without the use of medically important antibiotics is widely available at no cost premium. Pork is also available to a lesser extent.

### 4. Model Local, Nutritious, Sustainable Food at Conferences, Meetings and Workshops

Health care professionals frequently attend conferences for professional

development. Hospitals and health systems host a wide variety of workshops, conferences and symposia both onsite and at local facilities. Work with your local conference center or hotel and implement contract language that would require nutritious, local and sustainable food at all or part of your event. Similarly, ask your GPO, medical, nursing, dietetic or other professional organizations to implement nutritious and sustainable food contract provisions. Many facilities provide a holiday or seasonal meal for their employees. Consider an all local and/or organic celebration. See the Society for Nutrition Education's "Guidelines To Increase The Use Of Local Foods At Meetings" under Resources and Relationships at [www.sne.org](http://www.sne.org).

### 5. Buy milk produced without recombinant Bovine Growth Hormone.

Recombinant Bovine Growth Hormone (rBGH, also known as rBST) is given to dairy cows to increase milk production for longer periods of time. This practice often results in increased udder infections (necessitating the use of antibiotics) and increases the risk of other adverse health effects in cows. Treatment with rBGH also increases levels of growth factor (IGF-1) found in milk and has raised concerns about human health effects. The use of this hormone is not allowed in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and all 25 nations of the European Union.

Health care systems can purchase non-rBGH milk from their suppliers. There are two categories of non-rBGH milk - organic and non-organic. Organic milk, in addition to being rBGH-free, also prohibits the use of pesticides in feed and antibiotic use in cows. Non-organic rBGH-free milk allows the use of pesticides and antibiotics, and can be similarly priced to conventional milk. Working with your GPO and your distributor, ask

suppliers for availability and verification methods for rBGH-free dairy products.

### 6. Buy Organic and other Certified food.

Products can be labeled as organic if they are produced under certain conditions without synthetic pesticides, hormones or antibiotics and are certified by the USDA or an independent third party.

Widespread use of pesticides for growing agricultural products has resulted in exposure to farm workers and residents in rural communities and contaminated ground and surface water. Pesticide exposure has been associated with chronic neurological problems, behavioral problems, impaired reproduction, birth defects and cancer.

By purchasing products that are certified organic, health care systems may be improving the health of their patients while helping to protect agricultural workers and our air and water, and creating a market that supports healthy, environmentally-friendly growing practices.

A variety of certification programs support different aspects of sustainable food production, including but not limited to water and soil conservation, working conditions and wildlife habitat. Food Alliance Certified, Protected Harvest, Certified Humane and Fair Trade are examples of certification systems which may include these and/or other criteria. Good certification systems are verifiable, transparent, avoid conflict of interest and disclose organizational structure and funding sources.

## 7. Consider establishing an overarching food policy.

Few things are more interrelated than local food systems and the forces that give rise to them. Health facilities may want to begin their food work by laying out a broad, integrated food policy. An aspirational policy or goal may then guide your facility's future efforts. Conversely, you may elect to build excitement and momentum one step at a time and tackle a broader food policy for your facility by building on your success. Through an understanding that healthy food includes more than nutritional quality, healthcare facilities and systems can play an important role in supporting the health of their staff, patients and local and global communities.

## 8. Buy from local producers.

By providing fresh, locally grown foods health care systems can support food systems that avoid the long distance travel, overuse of plastics packaging and chemical preservatives required for transporting food long distances. Buying locally produced foods avoids the massive fuel consumption and air and water pollution associated with long-distance transport. Buying local also helps to build relationships between the urban and rural community and supports the local economy.

Some health care systems purchase their food through a supplier or contract with a private food service company distributor. In either case, it is worth learning what locally produced foods your vendor currently provides. Express a preference for purchasing fresh, locally grown and sustainable food from your vendors and ask them to provide these options.

If you currently have a contract with a prime vendor, investigate the percentage of foods that can be purchased outside the contract. Some health care systems are able to buy vegetables, dairy, coffee and other

products through local suppliers without violating their prime contracts. Finally, when your contract is up for renewal, use this as a time to negotiate the off-contract percentage purchases.

If you are able to buy from local producers, take the time to cultivate a relationship and communicate your needs to the growers. Start small by buying only a few products so a relationship can be developed with the supplier. Some health care systems have been able to plan menus and pre-order their produce from the growers before the growing season, providing security for both the grower and buyer.

## 9. Become a fast-food free zone.

Although fast-food restaurants provide food that is fast, cheap and convenient, it often has little nutritive value, is high in fat, sugar, salt and calories, and does not promote a healthy dietary pattern. Ironically, thirty eight percent of the sixteen hospitals that were listed as "Honor Roll" hospitals by the 2001 *US News & World Report* ranking of "America's Best Hospitals" currently have one or more fast food chains located in their institutions. Although these establishments may provide revenue for your facility and "comfort food" for patients and staff, their typical menu sends a strong message in contradiction to good eating habits.

Hospitals can review the food service operations within their facilities (patient food, cafeteria food, catering, vending machines and coffee carts) and evaluate whether the food choices offered are consistent with the promotion of healthy dietary patterns for patients, staff and the larger community. Food service operations and distributors that do not meet the criteria set forth by the hospital can be removed and replaced with those companies that can commit to offering high quality, nutritious food that does not compromise the health of visitors and staff.

## 10. Limit use of vending machines and replace unhealthy snacks with healthy choices.

Vending machines in hospitals provide a useful service as staff and visitors rely on them for snacks when the cafeteria is not open or when they do not have time for a full meal. However, vending machines are another source of fast, cheap and convenient, but often unhealthy food.

The types of food and snacks offered in vending machines should be consistent with dietary recommendations for healthy snacking. Vending machine options could include whole fruit, low fat and low sugar snacks and water or juice beverages. Hospitals can draft a policy that outlines the types of food that would be acceptable in vending machines (i.e. no trans-fat, low in processed sugars and fats, no artificial ingredients and no preservatives) as well as outlining food packaging standards and energy efficiency of machines. This type of policy can be used in negotiations when vending machine contracts come up for review.

## 11. Host a farmers' market on hospital grounds.

On-site farmers' markets and farm stands provide fresh produce to staff, visitors and patients. Farmers' markets support efforts to incorporate healthy foods into diets by increasing availability of fresh, locally grown foods. Farmers markets also generate goodwill in a community, support local growers and create new community partnerships.

Ideally, the market or farm stand supports sustainable agriculture systems by providing only locally grown foods that have been produced using sustainable methods such as organic production. In addition, the market can be authorized to accept

food stamps and WIC coupons, thereby increasing accessibility to healthy food in low-income populations. More information on healthcare farmers markets is available at [www.noharm.org/food/issue](http://www.noharm.org/food/issue).

## 12. Create hospital gardens to grow fresh produce and flowers.

Vegetable and herb gardens on hospital grounds not only provide healthy foods but also much-needed, thriving green spaces. Cut flowers can be sold or used in your facility. Hospital gardens can help to foster a sense of community and pride in hospital staff, offer a place of respite for patients and staff and create opportunities for community members (students, seniors or others) to be involved. Hospital gardens can also serve as demonstration gardens to educate the community about organic growing methods, integrated pest management and the incredible variety of foods that can be cultivated in a small urban space.

## 13. Compost, divert and reduce food waste.

Food waste comprises approximately 10 percent of a hospital's waste stream. Food and other organic waste can be diverted, composted or otherwise beneficially reused instead of being land-filled. Fresh but unwanted food can be donated to local soup kitchens or food "pantries." A la Carte programs are reducing food purchase and disposal costs. Through reductions in food waste volumes, composting has been demonstrated to be cost-effective.

Space limitations will dictate what type of composting method a health care facility can adopt. For those with limited space, food waste can be picked up by local haulers and sent to off-site composting facilities or used as animal feed. Those with more space may be able to compost their waste on-site using an in-vessel composting unit.

While not strictly "food waste," the purchase of recycled napkins, the use of paper or compostable dishware for "take-out" and recycling of kitchen cans and bottles are other ways in which hospitals are improving their environmental performance.

## 14. Buy certified coffee.

Coffee is the US's largest food import and second most valuable commodity after oil. Most coffee is grown in developing countries under conditions that require clear-cutting and heavy use of pesticides and where agricultural workers toil for little pay. There are many different types of certified coffee that can address these issues, like fair trade, shade-grown and organic. Buying certified coffee supports community development, health and environmental stewardship.

## Conclusion

Across the country, hospitals are improving their food purchasing choices to reflect a broader understanding of healthy food and increased public awareness about food quality is providing institutions with the motivation to highlight their "healthy" food programs. Hospitals are promoting their a la carte menus, organic food offerings and food policies through their website and marketing materials. Through procurement of locally produced food, health care facilities are returning economic benefits to their local citizens and communities. And through education to staff and patients about the relationship between health and how our food is produced and distributed, hospitals are modeling strong leadership for healthy communities and ecosystems.

## Resources

### Health Care Without Harm

The Health Care Without Harm - Healthy Food in Health Care Website contains a wide variety of in depth health care specific news, purchasing tools, educational materials, case studies, reports and related links.

[www.noharm.org/us/food/issue](http://www.noharm.org/us/food/issue)

### Green Guide For Health Care

A best practices guide for healthy and sustainable building design, construction and operations for the health care industry. Includes a variety of food and food waste strategies.

[www.gghc.org](http://www.gghc.org)

### Society for Nutrition Education

"Guidelines To Increase The Use Of Local Foods At Meetings" can be found on this web site under Resources and Relationships. There is also a downloadable brochure entitled "A Sense of Place: Serving Local Food at Your Meeting."

[www.sne.org](http://www.sne.org)

### Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition

This peer-reviewed professional quarterly examines factors that govern how people produce, procure, and consume food and the implications for nutrition and health. It examines hunger and environmental nutrition issues including sustainable food systems, poverty, social justice, and human values.

[www.haworthpress.com/web/JHEN/](http://www.haworthpress.com/web/JHEN/)



1901 North Moore St.  
Suite 509  
Arlington, VA 22209  
Phone: 703.243.0056  
Fax: 703.243.4008  
[www.noharm.org](http://www.noharm.org)  
[info@hcwh.org](mailto:info@hcwh.org)

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