



Implementing Nutritional Strategies in the Workplace

Abstract

The lifestyle of a health professional is mired with long hours, undue stress, shift work, poor sleep, inactivity, and unhealthy eating, despite their knowledge and expertise in what habits promote or preserve health. Healthcare workplaces are largely environments with underfunding, poor infrastructure, overcrowding, and limited or no access to health and well-being resources. The British Medical Association published a charter for minimum standards for facilities and preventing fatigue which has recommendations for access to freshly prepared food, extended hours for canteens and healthier options. ¹ Most health professionals report high levels of stress and burnout. Burnout is believed to be directly associated with poor patient outcomes and compromised safety. ² While better rota design, managed workloads, improved infrastructure, physical activity, psychological safety, and dignity at work are important determinants of employee health and well-being – access to a nutritious diet, water and education on healthy habits is a crucial component. Organisations including the National Health Service have a social responsibility to encourage healthier habits provide access to healthy eating within their premises and even offer incentives, not only to the patients they serve but also to their staff. This article explores the simple interventions that have been shown to be effective- and links to their evidence.

Keywords

Healthy food choices, hospital food, healthcare professionals, healthy eating incentives

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Cite as: Kumar, S. (2023)
Implementing nutritional
strategies in the Workplace.
Sushruta J Health Pol vol 15;
Issue 3: 1-6 DOI
10.38192/15.3.2

Article information

Submitted 17 Jun 23
Revised 15 Sep 23
Published 6 Oct 23



Introduction

Why promote healthy eating?

Promoting healthy eating and physical activity in the workplace enhances productivity – a balanced diet helps employees maintain focus, energy, and efficiency throughout their workday.³ When employees feel physically and mentally healthy, they are more likely to have a positive attitude towards their work and colleagues.⁴ A nutritious diet can strengthen the immune system, making employees less prone to illnesses. In addition to physical exercise, a healthy diet may lead to decreased absenteeism and fewer disruptions in work schedules.⁵ Organising activities centred around healthy eating, such as group lunches or potlucks featuring nutritious options, can encourage camaraderie and strengthen team bonds.

Healthy dietary patterns were defined in the 2015 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee Scientific Report as diets that are high in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low and non-fat dairy, and lean protein. Other characteristics of healthy dietary patterns are that they are low in saturated fat, trans fat, sodium and added sugars. Encouraging healthy eating habits can help prevent chronic diseases like obesity, diabetes, and heart disease.⁶ By supporting employees' well-being, employers demonstrate their care for staff's long-term health and happiness. Practical benchmarks of lost work and performance may help employers assess the financial impact of suboptimal health. Healthier employees tend to have fewer medical expenses, which can lead to lower healthcare costs for both employees and employers.⁷ An organisation that promotes healthy habits demonstrates social responsibility and commitment to employee well-being. This can enhance an organisational reputation and attract, as well as retain top talent.⁸ The UK

Parliamentary Hospital Food Standards Panel recommended that 'every hospital has a responsibility to provide the highest level of care possible for their patients and this, without question, includes the quality and nutritional value of the food that is served and eaten.' It also adds that 'this should include healthier eating for the whole hospital community, especially staff and sustainable procurement of food and catering services.'⁹

This report reviews the existing literature on healthier nutritional interventions, such as food labelling, catering, vending machines, educational resources, messaging tools, easy availability of water, and engaging champions to model healthy behaviours. The effectiveness, implications, and limitations of these interventions are discussed, along with recommendations for organisations as well as individuals.

At risk of being named a 'nanny state,' the UK Public Health Agency recommended the Eatwell Guide and principles of healthy eating for those above the age of 5 years.¹⁰

- eat at least five portions of a variety of fruits and vegetables every day.
- base meals on potatoes, bread, rice, pasta, or other starchy carbohydrates, and choose wholegrain versions where possible.
- have some dairy or dairy alternatives (such as calcium-fortified soya drinks), and choose lower fat and lower sugar options.
- eat some beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat, and other proteins. This includes - two portions of fish every week, one of which should be oily. If consuming more than 90g of red or processed meat per day, try to cut down to no more than 70g on average.

- choose unsaturated oils and spreads and eat them in small amounts.
- drink six to eight cups/glasses of fluid every day

Food Labelling

Food labelling is an effective tool for promoting healthier food choices among employees. Research shows that providing clear and easy-to-understand nutrition information on food items can help employees make informed decisions about their food choices, such as provided by NHS Inform.^{11,12} There is evidence that food labelling decreases consumer intake of energy by 6.6%, total fat by 10.6%, and other unhealthy dietary options by 13.0%, while increasing vegetable consumption by 13.5%. For the food industry labelling decreased product contents of sodium by 8.9% and artificial trans-fat by 64.3%. No significant impact was identified by label placement or type, duration, labelled product, region, population, voluntary or legislative approaches, combined intervention components, study design, or quality.¹³ However, the effectiveness of food labelling relies on employee engagement and understanding of the nutrition information provided. While nutrition knowledge is a prerequisite for label reading behaviour, trust and attitude are also important. Organisations should ensure that employees are educated on how to read and interpret food labels and incorporate this information into their daily food choices.

Catering Initiatives

Hospital catering has two-pronged challenges – on the one hand, most elderly patients suffer from undernutrition or patients with a range of conditions lose their appetite as a result of their illness, hence hospitals have to cater to different content and texture of food served to their patients (*multisensory flavour experiences*)¹⁴; while healthy staff have

limited access to food from external sources and need to be presented with options which are nutritious but healthy, in a competitive marketplace. Thus, workplace catering services focussed on staff can play a pivotal role in promoting healthier food options. Studies have shown that implementing healthy catering guidelines, such as offering more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and low-fat dairy products, can improve the overall nutritional quality of meals consumed by employees.¹⁵

Healthier Vending Machines

With most people in employment spending 60% of their waking hours in a work environment – where they will typically consume drinks, snacks and at least one meal – the workplace provides an opportunity to influence positive eating habits. The BMA Facilities charter recommends that between 11 pm and 7 am hospital staff should be offered access to healthy vending machines. Vending machines provided 922.2 million products, including snacks and cold drinks, in the UK in 2015. Almost 85% of vending machines are found in the workplace, and commonly in NHS working environments. With the NHS being the UK's biggest employer, healthier vending can offer a significant opportunity to encourage healthy consumption habits amongst NHS staff, as well as patients and visitors. In 2015, only 39% of vended cold drinks in the UK were reported to be “low sugar, diet or water”, and 14% of snacks were labelled as “healthier”.¹⁶ Thus, replacing traditional vending machine offerings with healthier snack options can improve employees' dietary choices. Research suggests that employees are more likely to choose healthier snacks when they are readily available in vending machines.¹⁷ However, healthier vending machine initiatives may face challenges in terms of product availability, cost, and consumer preferences.

Prompts, Educational & Cost Incentives

A simple, theory-based point-of-purchase system of prompts can produce small but significant reductions in the energy content of snack purchases from hospital shops.¹⁸ Providing educational resources, such as healthy cookbooks and sandwich containers, can encourage employees to adopt healthier eating habits. These resources offer practical guidance on preparing nutritious meals and snacks at home, which can contribute to improved overall diet quality.¹⁹ The effectiveness of these resources relies on employees' motivation and willingness to engage with the information provided and there is evidence that cost and healthy incentives can be sustained beyond the period of the offer.²⁰

Messaging

Communication strategies, such as posters, newsletters, and digital messaging platforms, can raise awareness about the importance of healthy eating and promote positive behaviour change among

employees. Research indicates that consistent and engaging messaging can lead to improvements in employees' dietary habits.²¹ Organisations should tailor their messaging tools to their specific workplace culture and employee population to maximize effectiveness.

Access to Drinking Water

Providing employees with reusable water bottles or easy access to drinking water can encourage increased water consumption and reduce the intake of sugar-sweetened beverages. Studies have shown that increasing water consumption is positively associated with better weight management and overall health.²²

Engaging Champions

Role modelling health behaviours through engaging champions can foster a supportive environment for healthy eating in the workplace. Champions can be influential employees who advocate for and demonstrate healthy behaviours, inspiring others to follow suit.²³

Recommendations for Organisations

1. Implement a combination of interventions to address multiple aspects of healthy eating in the workplace.
2. Ensure that interventions are tailored to the specific needs and preferences of employees. Provide ongoing education and support to help employees engage with and maintain healthy eating behaviours.
3. Monitor and evaluate the success of interventions to identify areas for improvement and adapt strategies accordingly.
4. Share guidelines and details about nutritional values, ingredients, and cooking methods when relevant.
5. Participate in community healthy eating initiatives and promote them through posters, leaflets, intranets, screen savers, payslips, and employee meetings.
6. Offer healthy packed lunch recipes and organize 'taste and try' events.
7. Organise themed healthy eating days or weeks, such as focusing on breakfast, pasta, or fruit.
8. Conduct educational sessions or workshops on nutrition, healthy eating, and cooking for employees.
9. Support employees striving to maintain a healthy diet or lose weight by encouraging the formation of support groups or enrolment in programs like Weight Watchers.
10. Collaborate with external nutrition or dietetics experts to provide seminars on healthy eating and nutrition.

Recommendations for Individuals

1. Engage with workplace interventions and educational resources to improve knowledge and skills related to healthy eating.
2. Seek support from colleagues, friends, and family to maintain motivation and accountability for healthy eating habits.
3. Set realistic goals for improving dietary habits and track progress over time.
4. Prioritise self-care and stress management as these factors can influence dietary choices and overall health.

Conclusion

Workplace nutritional interventions can play a crucial role in promoting healthy eating habits and reducing the risk of overweight and obesity among employees. Organisations should implement a combination of evidence-based interventions tailored to their specific workplace context and employee population. Individual employees should engage with these interventions and seek support to maintain healthy eating habits and contribute to overall well-being in the workplace.

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