

Health Promotion / Wellness / Psychosocial

Healthy Eating at Work

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Why should a workplace be concerned about healthy eating?

When a workplace can help employees to make wise food choices, as part of a workplace health program, it can influence the person's long-term health and wellness.

Together – healthy eating and [active living](#) – combined with a positive outlook can lead to:

- Reduced risk of heart disease and some forms of cancer.
- Elevated mood, energy and self-esteem.
- Reduced anxiety and stress.
- Opportunities to spend enjoyable time with family and friends.

How do you start a "healthy eating" program?

While it's most important for an employer to provide a safe and healthy workplace, it's also important to encourage healthy lifestyles among their employees. Healthy eating programs can be an important step. These programs can bring lots of people together to learn how to improve their health both at work and at home. As always, these programs should be part of a complete workplace health program and should not take resources or attention away from workplace hazards that may be present.

Before you start:

No matter how much you plan or make people aware, healthy eating programs are voluntary – not everyone will join or be interested. Survey employees to help you decide what types and levels of programs to offer.

When planning a health program, be sure you know the interests of your audience. In this case:

- Know why people are interested in a healthy eating program. Are participants looking for general nutrition information, or more specific programs such as heart health?
- Be sure to consider what types of programs have been offered in the past. Which programs worked? Which did not?
- Know exactly who your target audience is.
- Plan when will the program be offered (seasonal, or all year).
- Identify who people can go to if they have individual questions or want more help.

What should a healthy eating program focus on?

Workplaces that are going to start a healthy eating program should focus on the main messages from the Canada's Food Guide. They should also make sure that wherever their employees get their food – whether its vending machines, canteens, or cafeterias – that these venues should offer some healthier food choices.

[Canada's Food Guide](#) suggests the following for healthy food choices:

- Eat plenty of vegetables and fruits, whole grain foods and protein foods. Choose protein foods that come from plants more often.
- Choose foods with healthy fats instead of saturated fat.
- Limit highly processed foods. If you choose these foods, eat them less often and in small amounts.
- Prepare meals and snacks using ingredients that have little to no added sodium, sugars or saturated fat.
- Choose healthier menu options when eating out.

- Make water your drink of choice.
- Replace sugary drinks with water.
- Use food labels.

Canada's Food Guide also encourages people to examine their eating habits because health eating is also about where, when, why and how we eat. Healthy eating habits include to:

- Be mindful of your eating habits, including taking time to eat and noticing when you are hungry and when you are full.
- Cook more often – plan what you will eat, and involve others in planning and preparing meals.
- Enjoy your food, and include your culture and food traditions.
- Eat meals with others, when possible.

What are sample topics for a workplace healthy eating program?

When offering nutrition information at the workplace, be sure to offer a wide range of options. Topics for programs may include:

- Understanding the basics.
- Weight management and body image.
- Fad diets.
- How to eat more vegetables and fruits, whole grain foods and protein foods.
- Learn what protein foods that come from plants.
- Tips to reduce sodium (salt), sugars and saturated fats.
- Planning balanced meals for the whole family.
- Aging well.
- Making smart choices while grocery shopping and reading food labels.
- Programs for specific health conditions (e.g., diabetes, heart conditions, etc.).
- Healthy eating when away from home, including how to identify healthy choices when dining at restaurants.

Some more specific options for a workplace healthy eating program are:

- Offer material for employees to take home to help them make healthier choices when planning meals. For example:
 - Provide a sample shopping list and a plan for the week's meals you can make from that list.
 - Have handouts of the Canada's Food Guide.
- Provide information about how to make healthier food choices when shopping, ordering in restaurants, etc.
- Teach people how to read and understand food labels.
- Provide cooking tips for making healthy foods.
- Post a list of local restaurants that offer balanced food menus, dietary options, and dietary information such as calories per portion.
- Invite a speaker to a "lunch-n-learn" session.
- Have "theme" weeks or months.
- Stock vending machines with healthier options.
- Arrange for the on-site cafeteria to offer a range of healthy food choices.
- Have a refrigerator and microwave at work so people can bring healthy lunches from home.
- When lunches or drinks are provided at meetings, be sure to provide healthy choices.
- Arrange for a group to go to a weight management program together, or have the program come to your office at a convenient time.
- Give people a way to share healthy recipes with each other by using Intranet, e-mail, or posters.
- Provide information about how to use low-fat ingredients in favourite recipes.
- Organize a potluck lunch at work featuring healthy food choices. Try a multicultural day.
- Offer incentives, if people are interested.
- Offer a new tip or goal for each week, such as:
 - I will eat a plant based protein instead of meat once a week.
 - I will eat breakfast every morning.
 - I will have an extra piece of fruit every day.

Does the workplace influence how people eat?

Yes. Always remember that the workplace environment influences the health of its employees. For example, if a healthy eating program is offered, remember to look at where the employees eat their lunch. A safe and clean eating area is a requirement under most occupational health and safety laws. Beyond this, it is important to look at what is offered at vending machines and staff cafeterias. If you don't look at the larger picture to see how the workplace itself influences the eating patterns of the employees, the program will not work as well as it could.

Be sure the workplace supports healthy eating programs by providing time for employees to go to information sessions, offering appropriate foods in the cafeteria and vending machines, and by providing refrigerators and microwaves so that meals can be stored and prepared appropriately.

What are some tips for snacks to keep at work?

Store in your desk or locker	Store in the fridge	On the Road
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole grain crackers • Rolled oats (oatmeal) • Nut butter, such as peanut or almond butter • Canned fish • Canned soups • Nuts and seeds, such as almonds or cashews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole grain bagels / Bread • Low-fat yoghurt • Cottage cheese • Fresh fruit • Raw vegetables • Low-fat cheese • Salad greens 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cut carrots • Celery sticks • Apples • Whole grain crackers • Nuts and seeds

How can meetings and other work functions help employees gain healthy eating habits?

Situation	Try to Limit	Try Instead
Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Donuts • Large muffins • Cookies • Cream and sugar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole grain breads or crackers • Individual low fat yoghurt • Fresh fruit • Water
Vending machines / Catering Trucks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Danish • Chocolate bars • French fries • Pop • Chips 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water • Sandwiches made from whole grain bread and non-processed meats • Soup • Fruit • Yoghurt • Whole grain crackers
Hectic Schedule / Long Hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chips • Cookies • Coffee with cream • Hot dogs • Pizza with double cheese and pepperoni 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fresh fruit • Whole grain breads or crackers • Vegetables • Salads with lower-fat dressing • Non-processed meats • Yoghurt
On the road / Lunch Meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chips • Fried foods • Large burgers • Salads loaded with dressing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small plain burgers • Whole grain breads or crackers • Cheese • Water • Turkey and whole grain bread sandwiches • Pizza with vegetables

Do some jobs have specific nutrition concerns?

In most cases, no. Most jobs today do not require the employee to eat any additional calories to compensate for physical activity at work. The exception may be very physical work such as people who lift or carry heavy loads most of the day, such as shovelling, sawing trees by hand, farm work, etc. If you have concerns about meeting your nutritional needs, ask a dietitian or your family doctor for advice.

Should a workplace offer salt and fluid supplements when individuals are working in hot environments?

A person working at a high pace or in a very hot environment loses water and salt through sweat. On average, about one litre of water each hour may be required to replace the fluid loss. Plenty of cool (10-15°C) drinking water should be available on the job site and workers should be encouraged to drink water every 15 to 20 minutes even if they do not feel thirsty.

Many people drink sport drinks, fruit juice, etc. Drinks specially designed to replace body fluids and electrolytes may be taken but for most people, they should be used in moderation and water should still be consumed. The electrolyte drinks may be of benefit for workers who have very physically active occupations but keep in mind they may add unnecessary sugar or salt to your diet. Drinks with alcohol or caffeine should never be taken, as they dehydrate the body. For most people, water is the most efficient fluid for re-hydration.

A worker used to, or acclimatized to, lifting heavy loads or working in the heat sweats more "efficiently" – they sweat sooner and sweat more, but they lose less salt in their sweat than persons who are not used to such work. For this reason, the salt in a normal diet is usually enough to maintain the electrolyte balance – and keep the body working well. Generally speaking people will consume enough salt through their regular diet, so adding more salt when performing heavy tasks is not usually necessary. The use of salt tablets is not generally recommended, because the salt does not enter the body system as fast as water. Too much salt can cause higher body temperatures and can also make someone feel thirsty or sick. Workers who have questions about their salt intake should talk to their doctor about how much salt they need to match their job and dietary needs.

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