

Case Study: Healthier Food Challenge – Balanced Menus Goal



Summary

Johns Hopkins Hospital (JHH) took their commitment to the Healthier Food Challenge's Balanced Menus Goal of the Healthier Hospitals Initiative seriously. Given that meat is often the most expensive product category for hospital food service departments, JHH adopted the "less meat, better meat" strategy, first reducing by 15 percent the amount of meat they purchased overall in 2014 and then investing in purchasing healthier, more sustainably-produced meat products.

Johns Hopkins Hospital

The Problem

Most hospitals buy substantial amounts of meat, typically through large distributors who source from the U.S. commodity beef, pork, and poultry markets. Significant environmental and public health costs are associated with industrialized meat and poultry production and distribution: increased antibiotic resistance due to the overuse of medically important antibiotics in conventional meat production; air and water contamination from industrial factory farms known as CAFO's – Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations; and contributions to global climate change through methane and transportation emissions in production and distribution.

Americans also eat more than twice the global average for meat consumption, which can contribute to the onset of diet-related chronic diseases, such as obesity and diabetes. Hospital food service operations often mirror this trend, with large portion sizes and several meat options available on every menu at every meal. Reducing the overall amount of meat served in hospitals provides health, social, and environmental benefits that are consistent with prevention-based medicine. Hospitals can deliver an important preventive health message to patients, staff, and communities by reducing the amount of meat and poultry they serve and by purchasing more sustainably-produced, healthier meats as an alternative.

The Strategy Selected: Balanced Menus Challenge, "Less Meat, Better Meat"

With much support from the hospital administration and concerned clinicians, the food service staff at JHH made the Balanced Menus Challenge a priority. They took a multi-tiered approach, examining all of their menus to see where they could reduce the meat options, increasing their vegetarian entrée offerings, implementing a Meatless Monday program, and transitioning from a 6oz chicken breast to a 4oz chicken breast to reduce portion size, which still met the nutritional guidelines. JHH has a station in their retail cafeteria called The Mindful Station, where they started introducing the new sustainable meat products, produced without the routine use of antibiotics, in 2013. While they were introducing these new products, they were in conversation with their distributor and local producers communicating the need for more sustainable meat products on a weekly delivery schedule. With good feedback from the public about The Mindful Station, they began to gradually introduce the new meat products on all of their menus, retail and patient. One and a half years later, over 60 percent of their meat served at JHH is antibiotic-free. And they have not stopped at sustainable meat procurement. They now use only cage-free eggs, 100 percent of their seafood is sustainably-produced and having participated in the

About Johns Hopkins Hospital

Johns Hopkins Hospital is a large, urban, research hospital, one of 6 facilities in the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions system, serving an average of 850 patients per day with over 1,000 beds. The combined total of both patient and cafeteria food service amounts to 13,000 meals per day. The food service contract is managed by Sodexo, with Sysco as the main, broadline food distributor.

Buy Local Challenge program for the past three years, they are increasing their local procurement targets every year and now looking into a transition to more locally-sourced organic products. For example, the locally-produced pickles and tofu that they found during last year's Buy Local Week are now on the menu year-round.

Implementation Process

The success of the Balanced Menus Challenge at JHH is illustrative of their whole approach and commitment to healthier food for their patients and staff and a healthier food system. The food service department regularly organizes health screenings for their staff in conjunction with the Employee Wellness program, staff tastings and trainings about how to prep, cook and store new vegetables and other products on revised menus. There is an active Green Team at JHH and much support from the administration and clinicians on improving the food environment throughout the facility. JHH just removed sugar-sweetened beverages from the hospital last year, which generated a lot of debate internally, but with the wide-reaching support and consistent messaging about food trends and the health effects of soda consumption, the hospital-wide initiative is now in place.

Benefits

- With the less meat, better meat strategy, the increase in sustainable, healthy meat procurement has been offset by the reduction in meat procurement overall – cost-neutral.
- Hospital can feel better about serving meat products that don't take such a toll on our environment and our public health.
- The work the staff is doing to improve the food service operations are recognized and being praised by clinicians, senior leadership, patients and staff, and advocate groups for sustainability.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

When the hospital started trying to source more sustainable meat products from their broadline distributor, often times the products were not available to them. They have invested time in conversations with their distributors to be explicit about the type of products they want, the volumes they need and the emphasis on local and sustainable whenever possible. Pricing is always a challenge, but the less meat, better meat strategy did help to offset the costs of increased sustainable meat procurement. Data collection continues to be a challenge. It is often difficult and time consuming to quantify their progress, everyone seems to want different data sets, and stakeholders in the supply chain collect data sets differently. Still working on this one!