

Make the Healthy Choice the Easy Choice at Recreation Centers

Introduction

Local recreation and sport facilities an opportunity to improve access to healthy food choices for our children, youth and other patrons. The Health Unit is excited about opportunities to work with municipalities and staff at our local recreation and sport facilities towards supportive environments in recreational settings, while also supporting and enhancing the profitability of its food services, improving the health and performance of young athletes and overall health of our community.

Evidence

Research shows that communities across Canada have added healthy choices to recreation centre canteens and remained profitable. The changes were very well received and appreciated by families and visitors of those facilities. Two Ontario surveys found that one of the primary reasons people are not buying food at recreation centres is the lack of healthy choices available. Ninety percent of respondents want healthy food options at recreation facilities. Research that compares actual purchase prices from food wholesalers to typical retail prices proves that healthier items are very competitive, and sometimes even better than the less healthy options. For example:

- A baked potato with salsa, selling for \$2.00, cost \$0.19 wholesale; a similar portion of French Fries, selling for \$2.00, cost 30¢ (see the back of this page for more cost comparisons).

Best Selling Healthy Food Items and Healthy Food Items Patrons Would Purchase

A study was conducted in Niagara District to evaluate the “Fuelling Healthy Bodies” program. The best-selling food items that are considered healthier from the pilot study conducted in 2013/2014 and based on three participating concessions over a 20 week time period include the following (from most to fewer units sold): Chocolate milk, fruit, soup, Oasis Juices, Kelloggs Nutrigrain Bars, 2% white milk, smoothies, veggies & dip. These are the same best-selling “healthier items” for 5 concessions in the Niagara District who decided to participate in the program later in 2014 (with the addition of Quaker Instant Oatmeal Variety Packages).

Healthy food options patrons would purchase if available identified by patrons in 10 arenas in the Durham area were fruit as the number one choice (185 of survey respondents or 44%) and vegetables as the second choice (155 of survey respondents or 37%). In the Sudbury area, when patrons in two arenas were surveyed about what healthy food items they would purchase if available, the top items included: Soups (23 respondents or 63%), yogurt/yogurt drinks (21 respondents or 58%), veggies & dip (21 respondents or 58%), fresh fruits (21 respondents or 58%), salads (19 respondents or 53%) and chili (19 or 53%). Finally, a recent survey conducted at the Cobourg Community Centre showed that if a greater variety of food/drink options were made available, 241 patrons (55% of respondents) are very likely and 166 patrons (or 38%) are somewhat likely to buy more food/drinks; also, approximately 200 respondents indicated that it would be nice to have smoothies, wraps, soup, salad, chili; which could be “healthier” type of items that could be offered.

- **Healthy Choices Wholesale and Retail Costs**

2007 New Brunswick Study

Food Item	Sale price	Wholesale cost	Difference
Apple	\$1.00	\$0.30	\$0.70
Veggie Sticks	\$2.50	\$0.70	\$1.80

Bagel	\$1.00	\$0.30	\$0.70
Cereal/Granola Bar	\$1.25	\$0.45	\$0.80
Chocolate milk	\$2.00	\$1.06	\$0.94
Hummus and pita	\$2.50	\$1.28	\$1.22

The evidence shows that not only can healthier food choices be profitable but that patrons of local recreational and sport facilities want and would purchase healthier foods if they were made available. With the time spent in recreation facilities increasing, providing more healthy choices has the potential to reach a whole new market of people.

How Can the Health Unit help?

The HKPR District Health Unit can work with and assist in various ways to increase healthy choices provided by local recreation and sport facilities:

- Facilitating key partnerships within the community such as partnering with the new Agri-food Venture Centre, local food providers, local farmers, committees, marketing boards, etc.; and providing assistance in gathering information from patrons' about their needs
- Investigating funding opportunities
- Providing education and resources to clearly demonstrate the link between healthy eating and athletic performance
- Assisting with promotion
- Piloting simple, healthy, profitable food items to establish the best sellers
- Piloting special event days or pre-ordering for sports teams during tournaments

The momentum created by the recently endorsed Northumberland County Food Charter, Food Policy Committee, and Ontario Agri-Food Venture Centre can be leveraged to contribute to the success of this initiative. We can come together to make local recreation and sport complex like the Jack Burger a leader in providing healthy food choices and enhance the vibrant culture and great programming this facility has brought to our community.

Common Concerns

"Healthy choices won't make money."

As shown in the examples provided, there are healthy choices that can be even more profitable than less healthy options. Results of pilot study in Niagara showed a profit from sales of the healthier options. The results of the CCC survey can inform which healthy choices are most likely to sell in our area.

"It's the parents' responsibility to limit unhealthy foods."

Faced with hungry kids while on the run often makes eating at recreation centres a necessity. While education and individual choice are important, research shows that they're not enough. Making sure that healthy choices are available where we live, work and play assists parents in making healthy choices for their families.

"Food eaten at recreation centres is just a "treat" so we don't need to worry about healthy choices."

While there's no real definition of a "treat" in terms of how many times or the type of food eaten, busy families can find themselves spending several nights a week at recreational centres so the choices made here can have a real impact on their eating habits.

"It will be too much work for our staff."

After the Niagara pilot study, the majority of concession staff who participated in an interview following the pilot did not feel that the pilot project presented operational challenges; the pilot products were reported to be just as easy to prepare, display and store as regular menu items. Our Health Unit can assist with selection of items that are simple, healthy, and profitable.

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References

Study to Evaluate Fuelling Healthy Bodies. A report commissioned by Healthy Living Niagara and funded by the Government of Ontario. Prepared by the Foodservice & Franchise Consultants, June 2, 2015.

Fueling Healthy Bodies Evaluation Summary can be provided upon request.

Healthy Food Choices in Recreation Facilities: It just makes sense. Healthy Eating Physical Activity Coalition of New Brunswick. http://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/departments/dhic/wellness/content/healthy_foods.html