

- A partnership of public health researchers across the five universities in North East England
- Working with policy makers and practice partners to improve health and wellbeing and tackle inequalities
- A founding member of the NIHR School for Public Health Research (SPHR)

Can hospital-located fruit and vegetable stalls help staff to eat healthier?

Over 500 staff at the Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust participated in a service evaluation exploring how two fruit and vegetable stalls at different hospitals helped staff to eat more healthily. The findings show an increase in healthy eating habits among staff, both at work and at home, and even for long-stay patients and their families.

A dietetics Masters student at Teesside University, supported by researchers from Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, and the Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust Head of Dietetics and Senior Nurse, conducted an anonymised online questionnaire in which 501 staff took part and 16 staff participated in online interviews. Staff were asked about the stall locations, value for money, choice and impact of the stalls on their health eating habits. This data was then analysed.

Study findings showed that accessibility of healthy fruit and vegetables, quality of food, stall cleanliness and varieties of fresh fruit and veg were all attractive features of the stalls.

What staff said:

- Just under 50% of staff visited the store every week.
- 70% of staff ate fruit and vegetables every day.
- 39% said they were eating the recommended "5-a-day" fruit and vegetable portions.
- Things stopping staff using the stalls included price, work shift patterns, and for some, reluctance to wearing uniforms outside and the stall located too far away to access during a short work break.

Because the stalls were located in the hospital grounds:

- 28% of staff agreed that there was an increased awareness in healthy eating.

- 38% shopped more for fruit and vegetables.
- 33% reported changes in healthy eating habits.
- Some staff also commented on how the friendliness of stall staff raised their mood, contributed to a sense of wellbeing and decreased stress during work hours.

Key Findings

- Staff described how the stalls helped them to eat more healthily at work by "topping up" on fruit and veg to eat during shifts, and some staff also used it as their main fresh produce shop. Staff appreciated the convenience of the stall, especially for those on long shifts, to have choice and access to healthy food.
- As a result of accessing fresh produce from the stall, staff said they were eating less processed food, eating larger amounts and a wider variety of fruit and vegetables, and looking for food options containing more vegetables, including buying fruit instead of a packet of crisps or other unhealthy snacks. Some vegetarian and vegan staff said they ate more fruit as a snack instead of chocolate.
- At home, staff said that they used stall produce to support healthy eating and cooking and by including fruit and veg in their children's packed lunches.
- Staff also shared how colleagues influenced their social eating habits, such as sharing fruit instead of cake in team meetings, shopping at the stall as a group, being encouraged by others who bought from the stall to eat healthier and encouraging colleagues to try new fruit and vegetables from the stall.
- The impact of the fruit and vegetable stalls was not limited to staff but also extended to patients. Staff described how the stalls helped long-stay inpatients and children on wards, including their parents, to eat healthy produce. Physiotherapy staff also deliberately incorporated walking practice to the stall.

Policy relevance and implications

- Fruit and vegetable stalls at hospitals are well received by both staff and patients. They increase accessibility to healthier alternatives and encourage healthy eating habits among staff, both at work and home.
- The stalls are particularly beneficial for staff on long shifts and potentially for long-stay patients and their families.
- The stalls promote more healthy social eating habits at work, such as bringing fruit instead of cake to team meetings and encouraging others to eat healthier by shopping as a group at the stall.

To improve the stalls, staff recommended:

- Extending the opening hours for staff on longer shifts.
- Liaising with the hospital to provide additional staff discount.
- Providing consistency in produce quality and variety.
- Offering nutritious meal recipe cards using stall produce to promote healthy eating and educational leaflets on healthy eating.
- Advertising the stall, produce promotions and healthy eating information more widely.

“Finding a reasonably priced healthy option for lunch or a snack within walking distance of work during a limited break is very difficult. Having the stall on hospital grounds means it’s easy to make a healthy choice.” (Staff member)

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

The Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust introduced two fruit and vegetable stalls at Freeman Hospital and the Royal Victoria Infirmary in 2019 and 2020, with the aim of providing access to better nutrition within the hospitals. In 2021, the Trust’s Head of Nutrition and Dietetics and Senior Nurse for Nutrition and Hydration approached AskFuse - the responsive research and evaluation service run by Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health - to evaluate the impact of the stalls on the healthy eating behaviours of Trust staff.

Future evaluation could investigate other factors for behaviour change by evaluating how staff income impacts accessibility, the impact of the stalls on ward and theatre-based staff, and how staff feel they can help inpatients to access the stalls.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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