

Guidelines for Healthier Canteens

Fact sheet

The Netherlands Nutrition Centre has developed a set of guidelines – Guidelines for Healthier Canteens – which can be applied in canteens at schools, sports clubs and workplaces to make them more healthy. These guidelines make it easier for consumers to make healthy choices. This edition of the Guidelines for Healthier Canteens replaces the 2014 edition. The current edition has been updated to include the Wheel of Five Guidelines and to comply with the lessons learned from previous guidelines.

The Guidelines for Healthier Canteens cover canteens at product level and at the level of the full range of food and drink being offered, together with the canteen's general display layout. Criteria for a healthy choice are already in place at product level, in the form of the Wheel of Five Guidelines,¹ which have been incorporated into the Guidelines for Healthier Canteens. At the level of the full range of food and drink being offered and of the canteen's general display layout, criteria have been formulated with the goal of making canteens in general more healthy.

The framework of the Guidelines for Healthier Canteens gives canteens plenty of scope. It defines three different levels: bronze, silver and gold. The more precious the metal, the healthier the food and drink being offered and the better the canteen's display layout. The bronze level is restricted to canteens at sports clubs and workplaces. School canteens are expected to be at silver level, or above.

This factsheet sets out the scientific basis of the Guidelines for Healthier Canteens. The guidelines are based on the results of research into the factors that influence people's choices, the Wheel of Five Guidelines and lessons learned in the course of the 'Healthy School Canteen' programme. In addition, experts in the field of food and behaviour-change were consulted, and practical issues raised by those who would ultimately be using the guidelines were taken into account.



For whom is it relevant?

The Guidelines for Healthier Canteens provide a basis for those who are committed to making canteens healthier, such as the directors of schools, sports clubs or workplaces, canteen managers and staff, caterers and volunteers. These guidelines also provide a starting point for policymakers who want to encourage canteens to offer a healthier range of food and drink. The guidelines also make it clear what consumers can expect from canteens in which these guidelines have been implemented.

What issues are involved?

A range of issues were taken into account while developing the guidelines, such as 'What do consumers want?', 'How are food choices made?', and 'How can food choices be influenced?'.

Consumer needs

In a study involving more than 2,000 Dutch people, 41% of the subjects indicated that they wanted to improve their eating behaviour, and 43% said this was very difficult to achieve. They were aware that they were primarily responsible for eating more healthily. The two most frequently mentioned factors were the need to exert more willpower and to be better at resisting temptations. More than half (53%) of the subjects wanted to see a wider range of healthy products being offered at grocery stores, for example, as well as at work, at school or college, while on the go and at commercial catering establishments.²

In a study including more than 400 adolescents at secondary schools, the subjects indicated that they are tempted by the food and drink being offered by their school canteen. Some of them would like their canteen to sell only healthy products.³ Sixty percent of the

visitors to sports clubs' canteens would like to see a more equal balance between healthy and less healthy food and drink, or even more healthy choices than less healthy ones.⁴

Making choices

Broadly speaking, human behaviour is controlled by two cognitive systems: the reflective system and the impulsive system.^{5,6} The reflective system is based on rational choices and is largely conscious in nature. It involves conscious reasoning, and choices are preceded by a period of consideration. This system, therefore, requires time and energy. The impulsive system controls behaviour in an automatic and spontaneous way. Impulsive processes are initiated by a particular environmental cue. Thus the impulsive system controls our behaviour rapidly, effortlessly and unconsciously.

Food choices are often habitual. And habits are mostly mediated by the impulsive system. Therefore, food choices are prone to environmental influences.

An assault on willpower

Although many people are aware that unhealthy food habits contribute to severe health risks, it is difficult for them to change unhealthy habits. We need self-control to resist temptations in our daily food environment. That takes a great deal of mental effort, but we can manage this for a short period of time.

However, as a result of changes in the food environment in the Netherlands over the past few decades, the range of unhealthy and calorie-dense foods being offered has expanded and become more accessible. We are continuously exposed to these temptations.⁷ This can eventually lead to 'will power fatigue' (ego depletion).^{8,9} The impulsive system takes over, after which most choices will be of the impulsive kind. When the range of food and drink being offered is mainly unhealthy, this often leads to an unhealthy food choice.

A nudge in the right direction

Interventions that focus on providing information about lifestyle and health risks target the reflective (i.e. rational) system. These interventions are often not sufficiently effective to change risk behaviour.¹⁰ That is why, over the past few years, there has been a greater emphasis on interactions between automatic controlled behaviour (the impulsive system) and environmental cues in interventions that aim behavioural change.





The focus is on changing behaviour by modifying the environment. Nudging consumers without limiting their freedom is the key factor here.¹¹ The Guidelines for Healthier Canteens are based on this principle. They nudge people towards a better food choice by modifying the canteen's environment, without completely eliminating less healthy options.

Encouraging a healthier food choice

The Guidelines for Healthier Canteens are based on scientific findings showing that consumers tend to preferentially consume food and drink that is prominently displayed and easily available.^{12, 13}

Two systematic reviews conclude that changing environmental factors has a small effect on people's food choices in the canteen at work.^{14, 15} Other studies have shown that fruit and vegetable intake increases if these foods are more accessible and visible, and/or if information or promotional material is present. Furthermore, various studies have demonstrated that the sales of healthier products increase if larger quantities of these products are on display. For example, in a canteen setting, more healthy snacks were selected when the relative quantity on display was increased.¹⁶ Both at school and in the workplace, increasing the range of low-calorie snacks

and drinks in vending machines boosted the sales of these healthier choices in comparison with settings where no such changes were made.^{17, 18}

In addition to proportional increases in the healthy range of food and drink being offered, there are several other aspects of the way in which food is offered that may affect choice. Even small changes in the placement and accessibility of products, or in the ease with which they can be consumed, might be sufficient to change people's choices in this regard.^{12, 13, 19, 20}

Together, these indications support the view that the widespread presence and prominent placing of healthier products may help people to make healthy choices.

Regarding the effectiveness of implementing the above mentioned strategies, the total weight of evidence is still limited.^{14, 15} In most cases, several strategies are combined into a single intervention, which makes it difficult to identify the individual contribution of various nudges. In addition, their long-term effects on food choice, behaviour and health are unclear. More research is needed.

The criteria used in the Guidelines for Healthier Canteens

The Guidelines for Healthier Canteens define three different levels: bronze, silver and gold. These correspond to an increasingly healthy range of food and drink being offered and to increasing healthiness in terms of the canteen's display layout. A more detailed explanation of the guideline criteria that correspond to each of these levels is given below.

The basis for all canteens

Food and drink being offered

- In each food group, the canteen offers one better option, at the very least.
For example, in the dairy food group, semi-skimmed milk is offered alongside full-fat milk.

Basic display layout criteria

- Each canteen meets the following three basic display layout criteria:
 1. Better options are placed in the most eye-catching spots where food and drink is displayed (at the counter, in display cases and on racks).
 2. Better options are placed at the most eye-catching spots in vending machines.
 3. If food and drink is offered at the cash desk, this will only consist of better options.Further details of the remaining six display layout criteria are given on the next page of this fact sheet.
- The canteen encourages people to drink water, by having a water tap for example.
- The organisation's written policy includes a statement that the canteen meets the Guidelines for Healthier Canteens.

Bronze canteen: makes it possible to choose a better option

Meets the basis for all canteens.

This level is only applicable to canteens in sports clubs and workplaces.

Silver canteen: provides lots of space for better options

Meets the basis for all canteens, and:

- at least 60% of the food and drink on display consists of better options.
- at least 60% of the food and drink in vending machines consists of better options.
- the canteen's display layout motivates people to select a better option, and meets at least three of the additional display layout criteria.
- the canteen offers fruit or vegetables, at the very least

Gold canteen: where the better option is the obvious option

Meets the basis for all canteens, and:

- at least 80% of the food and drink on display consists of better options.
- at least 80% of the food and drink in vending machines consists of better options.
- the canteen's display layout motivates people to select a better option, and meets at least five of the additional display layout criteria.
- the canteen offers fruit and vegetables.

The better option

The definition of a better option is based on the Wheel of Five Guidelines.¹ The Wheel of Five itself contains nothing but healthier options, such as water, whole-grain bread, semi-skimmed milk and fruit. Products containing too much salt, sugar or saturated fat, or very little fibre (such as biscuits, soft drinks and crisps), are not included in the Wheel of Five. Nor does it contain products like white bread, sauces, sandwich fillings (such as cold meats, jam or fruit sprinkles) and custard. A healthy diet based on the Wheel of Five can include some products that do not feature in the Wheel of Five, but only to a limited extent. Small items should be eaten no more than three to five times per day (a so-called daily selection) and larger items no more than three times per week (a so-called weekly selection). Examples of daily selection items include one portion of low-fat cold meat as a sandwich filling (e.g. chicken breast), a small biscuit, an ice lolly, a piece of chocolate or a spoonful of tomato ketchup to go with a grilled cheese sandwich. Weekly selection items include a large slice of full-fat cheese, a large biscuit, chips with mayonnaise, a small bowl of crisps, a glass of soft drink or a croissant. The advice is to keep the portions small, and to not eat the same items too often.

What the Guidelines for Healthier Canteens define as 'better options' covers every product included in the Wheel of Five plus the daily selections. It does not cover the weekly selections. Allowing canteens to include daily and weekly selections in the food and drink being offered, in addition to products from the Wheel of Five, gives them greater freedom in terms of managing their food and drink offerings. This guarantees consumers freedom of choice to eat any snacks or meals that they want.

Additional display layout criteria

In addition to the three basic display layout criteria, the following criteria also apply to canteens' display layouts:

- fruit and vegetables are presented in an attractive manner.
- as consumers move along the route through the canteen, the better options catch their eye first.
- special promotions or discounts are restricted to better options.
- the majority of the food and drink items on the menu and/or pricelist are better options.
- visual materials featuring food and drink are restricted to better options.
- advertisements for specific brands or for food and drink products on vending machines, are restricted to products included in the Wheel of Five.

The ideal canteen

An ideal canteen only offers products that feature in the Wheel of Five, such as whole-grain bread, healthy sandwich fillings, semi-skimmed yoghurt, water and tea. It also meets all of the display layout criteria. An ideal canteen like this represents a huge change compared to the range of food and drink currently being offered in the average canteen. In 2015, a quarter or more of the food and drink being offered at most schools consisted of products that should be eaten only occasionally.²¹ The food and drink sold in canteens at sports clubs mostly consists of products that should be eaten only occasionally.²² Canteen operators can either start at the bronze level and make their canteen healthier one step at a time, or skip straight to silver, to gold or to the ideal canteen.

The Canteen Scan

In 2015, the Canteen Scan was developed in cooperation with Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. This is a tool that can be used to implement the Guidelines for Healthier Canteens. Details of the canteen's current food and drink offerings and display layout can be entered in the tool, which then indicates the canteen's current level. It then provides tailored advice on improvements in the canteen's food and drink offerings and its display layout.

More information

For more information about the criteria, the Canteen Scan, tips and examples, as well as for inspiration, see

www.voedingscentrum.nl/healthyschoolcanteen



Looking at the future

Next to the prominent placement of healthier products, other factors that might have a positive effect on healthy food choices include price reductions, tax measures (for example a higher tax on soft drinks) and, to a lesser extent, printing health information on the product label.²³⁻²⁶ These measures are also seen as potential strategies in the effort to encourage healthy

eating. However, some of these measures are more easily applied in canteens than others. If these measures are to succeed, then providers, manufacturers and wholesalers must cooperate to develop an overall strategy. In the future, it will be determined whether one or two of these strategies will be added to the Guidelines for Healthier Canteens.

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