

Healthier catering tips for food businesses

Guidance for food businesses on providing and promoting healthier food and drink.

Healthier eating is becoming more important to customers. Here are some practical catering suggestions to help support your customers with a healthier lifestyle.

You may already be achieving several of these tips but be prepared to go further and make real changes to help your customers make healthier choices.

Portion size

Eating too many calories can lead to obesity, which in turn increases the risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease and some cancers. Even small reductions at each meal can make a real difference

- Think about the size of your portions. **Have a set portion for each ingredient** (for example, a certain size of scoop/spoon or a fixed number of slices/pieces) and ask staff to keep to these portion sizes to provide consistency for your customers – this could help you save money.
- Make small portions or children's portions available and market these to everyone.

Fats and frying

High-fat foods contain lots of calories, which can lead to weight gain. This in turn can lead to type 2 diabetes, heart disease and some cancers. Reducing saturated fat intake can lower blood cholesterol and reduce the risk of heart disease.

- **Use a healthier oil for frying** like rapeseed or sunflower oil as these contain less saturated fat.
- Use lean mince or drain off the fat, **trim excess fat from meat and remove skin from chicken** whenever possible.
- **Offer to grill or bake food instead of frying** (for example, grilled fish, bacon and sausages) and consider making this the default cooking option. State the option clearly on your menu and train your staff to offer this option. Some customers prefer the option and it's healthier.
- Use lower fat varieties or smaller amounts of these products;
- cheese naturally lower in fat, like Edam) or use less hard cheese
- cream (try single instead of double cream, half-fat crème fraîche or, better still, lower fat plain yogurts)
- milk (use skimmed, 1% fat or semi-skimmed as a default)
- butter/spreads (use low or reduced fat spreads or use less butter)
- yogurt (choose low fat or fat free plain natural yogurts)
- mayonnaise (swap to light mayonnaise – it has up to 60% less fat)
- dressings (choose light varieties or use less oil in homemade dressings)
- If you need to deep fat fry, for the best results;
 - **Ensure the oil is heated to the correct temperature** (160-165°C if you have a high efficiency fryer or 175°C if you have a traditional fryer). Too low and it will absorb too much fat, too high and it will spoil the oil.

- **Avoid frying food more than once.** Par-frying, double or triple cooking and reheating food in oil increases the fat content of the food.
- **Bang, shake and drain off any excess fat.** This can reduce fat absorption by 20%.

Salt

It is important to reduce salt intake as too much salt can lead to high blood pressure and an increased risk of stroke and heart disease.

- **Consider removing salt and soy sauce from tables** and counters and provide it to customers only on request. Many businesses are already doing this. People sometimes add salt out of habit without thinking or tasting the food.
- Avoid adding salt when boiling rice, pasta, potatoes or vegetables.
- **Add less salt and salty ingredients to meals over time.** Ingredients like stock, ketchup, mustard, gravy, seasoning packets and soy sauce can contain a lot of salt so be careful how much you use. Customers won't notice if you do this gradually. Try adding a little less each week until you can avoid adding it altogether. You could also try to procure reduced salt versions of these products (e.g. stock preparations below 0.6g salt/100ml).

Sugar

Eating too many foods and drinks high in sugar can contribute to excess calories and lead to weight gain, which in turn increases the risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, stroke and some cancers. It is also linked to tooth decay.

- **Offer healthier drinks as the default option** such as water, lower fat milks, low calorie or no added sugar drinks, or pure fruit juices (in a 150ml serving size or as close to this volume as possible), rather than sugary drinks. Display these at eye level where appropriate.
- Where desserts are available, offer those lower in fat and sugar and/or smaller portion sizes or replace with fruit options such as fresh fruit without sugar or syrup. You can also offer desserts that meet [Public Health England's sugar reduction and calorie or portion size guidelines](#).

Fruit, vegetables and fibre

These are low in calories and good sources of vitamins, minerals and dietary fibre. Eating plenty of them will help to promote digestive health and can help prevent heart disease, stroke and some cancers.

- **Include at least one portion of vegetables (80g) as part of a meal.**
- **Include a starchy carbohydrate** (e.g. potatoes, bread, rice or pasta with no added fat), vegetables or salad and one portion of fruit (a piece of fruit or a fruit salad) in meal deals instead of promoting less healthy snacks like crisps, chocolate, chips etc. The fruit can be fresh, canned in fruit juice, dried or frozen.
- Look across your menu and think about where you could **add more vegetables and/or pulses to as many dishes as possible** (while not adding more fat, sugar or salt) e.g. soups, stews and rice. They are usually cheaper than meat and fish so could save you money and will increase the fibre content of dishes.

- **Consider including wholegrain or higher fibre carbohydrates** (e.g. wholemeal bread, wholewheat pasta and brown rice) as options on your menu and promote as the default option.
- **Offer fruit salad or a fruit platter** on your dessert menu or fruits like melon or figs as part of a starter. The fruit can be fresh, canned in fruit juice, dried or frozen.

Promote healthier options

Although it is important to improve the nutrient content of all menu items, you can additionally develop promotions to give a unique selling point and encourage customers to pick a healthier meal or snack to eat.

- **Promote healthier options with more fruit and vegetables.** You do not necessarily have to advertise them as healthier but study your menu and make sure the healthier items stand out and are good value. Do not offer discounts and special deals for food or drinks that are low in fibre and high in fat, salt or sugar (for example, deep fried foods, salty foods like bacon, and sugary desserts or snacks).
- If you offer meal deals, this is a great way to get your customers to try healthier dishes and options. Offer healthier drinks and include a starchy carbohydrate (e.g. potatoes, bread, rice or pasta with no added fat), vegetables or salad. Where desserts are available, offer those lower in fat and sugar, offer smaller portion sizes or replace with fruit options.

Source healthier ingredients and food products from suppliers

[Check the nutrition information](#) about the foods and drinks you buy in and choose options with higher fibre and less salt, sugar and fats. Your supplier may be able to assist you.

Provide energy information

[Calorie Wise](#) is a free scheme in Northern Ireland to help catering businesses display calorie information on menus. This allows customers to have the information they need to make healthier choices when eating out.

The Food Standards Agency provides a free, online tool called [MenuCal](#) which helps businesses to calculate the energy value of food, in both kilojoules and kilocalories. The MenuCal tool also assists businesses to manage allergen information.