

Seasonal Foods: A New Menu for Public Health

“Serving healthy and sustainably grown food is as essential to the health of our community as the medical care we provide.”

—Siobhan McNally, MD
Pediatrician, Berkshire Medical Center

The food served in health care facilities has a significant impact on the health of patients, staff and visitors. Hospitals play an important leadership role in modeling food choices that benefit human and environmental health.

The Global Food Basket

How our food is grown, processed, transported and prepared impact human and environmental health. In past decades since fuel was cheap and government policies promoted international trade. Therefore new methods in processing, packaging and refrigeration resulted in transportation of food from around the globe. This globalized food system has unintended consequences including:

- The abundance of inexpensive nutritionally-empty, calorie-dense foods that has contributed to the obesity epidemic
- Policies for international trade that devastate small and midscale farm economies
- Chemical-dependent agriculture that pollute the air, water and soil
- Energy-intensive food system which contributes to global warming

Role of Health Care

Health Care is a leading sector of the economy and has the power to create market-based change. In 2006, about \$12 billion of total health care revenue was from food and beverages. The purchasing power of health care

facilities can influence how and where their food is purchased. By purchasing more local, seasonal foods, health care can influence how our food is grown, distributed, processed, and transported thus supporting human and ecological health.

Seasonal Produce

Seasonal foods are harvested locally and are defined by regional growing conditions. They vary with latitude, climate, topography and other related factors. There is no single national or international list of seasonal foods for large countries such as the United States or Canada.

For example, a strawberry grown and harvested in Washington in June and July can be harvested year round in California.

Benefits of Seasonal Foods

1. Taste and freshness increases consumption of fruits and vegetables

An ongoing challenge for the foodservice professional is how to encourage patients, employees and visitors to eat more fruits and vegetables. According to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), 64% of Americans do not eat their daily recommended amount of vegetables while 80% are not meeting their daily recommended fruit intake.¹

Seasonal Produce: What is in season near you?

State listings of what is locally grown:
www.sustainabletable.org/shop/eatseasonal

List of what is in season in your area:
www.localharvest.org

Tips to Serving Local Food on Your Menu

Start Small. During the growing season, substitute produce that you already serve with the same product from local farms.

Work through your existing distributors. Ask if they offer any local products and encourage them to do so.

Learn about local farms. Tour farms and invite farmers to your facility.

Be Patient. Buying local can be rewarding yet challenging at first. Be flexible and set realistic expectations and goals.

Advertise. Share with your customers what you are doing by labeling foods that come from local farms and tell stories about the food and the farmers.

Glynwood: A Guide to Serving Local Food on Your Menu www.glynwood.org

Most fruit and vegetable varieties are selected and grown because they withstand extended travel and storage, have a consistent size and shape for convenience of packaging and harvest often at the expense of flavor and nutrient content. Fruit and vegetables can spend up to 7-14 days in transit before arriving in your cafeteria. Locally grown seasonal fruits and vegetables are usually sold 24-48 hours after being harvested.²

To minimize transaction costs the industrial global food system minimizes the specific varieties of fruit and vegetables it purchases and distributes. While this system will provide us with one or two varieties of a specific fruit or vegetable throughout the year that is the only variety it will provide regardless of other varieties that are more flavorful or nutritious.

Produce that is picked and eaten locally at the height of their ripeness has exceptional flavor and when handled properly, has maintained its maximum nutrients. We know that if fresh food tastes good, people will eat it. Providing local, seasonal foods can encourage increased consumption of fruits and vegetables because the fresher and more flavorful, the more we eat, as long as it is accessible and affordable.

Supporting local farmers helps provide a greater diversity of flavorful and nutritious foods.

2. Food Safety

Food service professionals and consumers alike are concerned about food safety. No matter where our food is grown assurance of safe and clean production practices is important. All foods, whether provided from local farmers or farmers across the country must meet similar food safety production standards. If a food safety issue should occur a localized, decentralized food system is far more able to contain it and thus provide a better more valuable safety net compared to centralized supply chains.

3. Competitive Prices

Buying produce in season, such as carrots, potatoes, apples and berries that are abundant in your region can

be cost competitive. Growers Collaborative, LLC, who sources local California produce compared 15 products with a distributor and found that sourcing local seasonal produce cost less than produce transported from around the country or globally. Another example of seasonal foods being price competitive from Cooley Dickenson Hospital in Massachusetts found that sourcing from a local growing collaborative saved them money on their local produce contracts.

4. Food Miles, Global Warming and Health

“Food miles” refers to the average distance food travels from farm to table. It is used as an indicator for greenhouse gas emissions. A study at Iowa State University found that the average food miles for produce to reach the institutional market was 56 miles for local produce compared to 1,494 miles for conventional produce.³

Food miles are also impacted by how food is transported. Air travel uses significantly more fuel per pound of food, therefore having a more significant impact upon the environment than other forms of transportation. Research is also demonstrating the impact of food packaging and refrigeration upon climate change.

Buying seasonal, local food can help reduce a hospital’s climate change footprint as it relates to food transportation and long distance refrigeration. The long-term solution is to create a food system that is more energy efficient while claiming a larger market for local seasonal foods.

Food Miles Comparison⁴

Produce Type	Locally Grown	Not Locally Grown
Apples	61	1,726
Broccoli	20	1,846
Lettuce	43	1,823
Tomatoes	60	1,569

Better Hospital Food: Seasonal Recipes

As a part of a comprehensive program to improve hospital food, the National Health Services (NHS), London UK brought together a team of leading chefs to develop a database of over 300 recipes that includes recipes based on seasonal local ingredients.

Better Hospital Foods: Seasonal Recipes
195.92.246.148/nhsestates/better_hospital_food/bhf_content/recipes/overview.asp

5. Support Local Community

Purchasing seasonal, local foods strengthens the capacity and viability of local farms and supports the economic vitality of the local community and region. A variety of studies from Iowa, Minnesota and Hawaii demonstrated that supporting local food systems improves the local economy. Hospitals can play a vital role in supporting the social and economic fabric of communities by procuring local foods.

How to Create Seasonal Menus

Seasonal menus are menus developed using predominantly local, seasonal foods. It requires thoughtful and creative planning to use predominantly in-season foods, or those that come from the closest possible growing region. However, this does not mean you must avoid all non-local foods in your meal planning. Transitioning to seasonal menus is a learning process. It is important to take small, manageable steps. These include:

- Develop a top ten list of foods you can easily replace with local, seasonal alternatives.
- Educate your staff about seasonal food in your hospital newsletter.
- Designate one meal a week or month that will highlight local seasonal foods as a pilot.
- Consider reducing and eliminating air freighted produce first. Typically, these are foods that are rapidly perishable such as leafy greens or berries obviously not in season.
- Ask your distributors to label where their food is grown, so you can select produce that is locally or regionally grown.
- Provide signs in your cafeteria highlighting the local farms and why local seasonal is important.
- Use seasonal menus as a marketing tool to capture the current trend of local foods through newsletters, menus, and educational materials to patients.

Example Harvest Calendar: New York State

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
Asparagus					●	●						
Apples	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲		●	●	●	●		
Blueberries							●	●	●	●		
Broccoli					●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Carrots	▲	▲	▲	▲			●	●	●	●	●	●
Cucumbers								●	●	●		
Eggplant								●	●	●		
Lettuce							●	●	●	●		
Peaches							●	●				
Potatoes	▲	▲	▲	▲			●	●	●	●	▲	▲
Radishes					●	●	●	●	●	●		
Squash, Summer						●	●	●	●	●		
Squash, Winter	▲	▲	▲					●	●	●	●	●
Strawberries						●						
Tomatoes							●	●	●			



Storage Period



Harvest Season

New York Harvest Calendar: <http://www.agmkt.state.ny.us/HarvestCalendar.html>
Refer to <http://www.sustainabletable.org/shop/eatseasonal> for your state's specific harvest calendar.

Conclusion

Health care professionals have the opportunity to be leaders in promoting a healthy food system by understanding how our health and the health of our environment is related to the growth, distribution and processing of our food. Buying local, seasonal foods provides the opportunity for hospitals and hospital systems to move food systems towards a public health focus.

RESOURCES

Healthy Food in Health Care: www.healthyfoodinhealthcare.org

Glynwood: www.glynwood.org/resource/guidelocalmenu.pdf
A guide to serving local food on your menu

Better Hospital Food: 195.92.246.148/nhsestates/better_hospital_food/bhf_content/recipes/overview.asp
Seasonal Recipes

Sustainable Food & Policy Project: www.foodalliance.org/sustainablefoodpolicy/index.html

Sample Food Policies - Organic Food Production Talking Points:
http://www.hendpg.com/files/HEN_Organic_Talking_Points_April_2007.pdf

Crossroads Resource Center: www.crcworks.org/rural.html

ENDNOTES

1. Economic Research Service (ERS). 2006. "Diet and Health Data: Food Consumption and Nutrient Intake Tables." Retrieved April 18, 2007 from: www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/DietAndHealth/data/foods/table4.htm
2. Food Routes. "The Best Tasting Food Ripens Close To Home. Retrieved April 4, 2008. <http://www.foodroutes.org/doclib/142/TasteColor11.20.pdf>
3. Pirog, Rich, Timothy Van Pelt, Kamyar Enshayan, and Ellen Cook. "Food, Fuel and Freeways: An Iowa Perspective on How Far Food Travels, Fuel Usage, and Greenhouse Gas Emissions." Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. June 2001.
4. Pirog, Rich, and Andrew Benjamin. "Checking the Food Odometer: Comparing Food Miles for Local Versus Conventional Produce Sales in Iowa Institutions." Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, July 2003.



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Health Care without Harm (HCWH) is an international coalition of organizations working to transform the health care sector, without compromising patient safety or care, so that it is ecologically sustainable and no longer a source of harm to public health and the environment. HCWH's Healthy Food in Health Care (HFHC) Program works with hospitals across the country to build a healthier, more sustainable food system, providing education and resources to make the connection between the food they serve and the health of their patients, staff and community.
