



Healthy Eating

Sugar-Sweetened Beverage
Case Studies



Removing Sugar-Sweetened Beverages

This document contains case studies of health care organizations that removed sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) from cafeterias and vending machines in their health care environments. These case studies were prepared by the American Cancer Society based on a series of interviews with key staff members responsible for the development and implementation of these policies within the hospital or health system.

Research has shown correlations between the consumption of SSBs and type 2 diabetes, heart disease, tooth decay, and obesity.^{(1) (2) (3)} In fact, obesity is linked to a higher risk of at least 13 different cancer types.⁽⁴⁾ Thus, research supports the practice of removing or limiting SSBs to help reduce obesity and improve chronic disease health outcomes.

Some of the organizations in the following case studies provide beverages containing non-nutritive sweeteners or sugar substitutes within their health care environments, which in some cases has been questioned by consumers who believe that these sweeteners are unhealthy or cause cancer. However, there is no evidence that these sweeteners, at the levels consumed in human diets, cause cancer.⁽⁵⁾

SSBs are still available on patient menus to accommodate special dietary needs (such as a diabetic clear-liquid diet) and for patient satisfaction purposes.



Dayton Children’s Hospital ⁽⁶⁾

Dayton Children’s Hospital – Sugar-Sweetened Beverage (SSB)-free since 2014	
Locations	2, as well as off-site locations for urgent care, rehab, labs, etc.
Food Service	1 cafeteria and 1 café
Employees	2,400+ total, including 400+ physicians/residents
Beds	155
Website	www.ChildrensDayton.org

Timeline

Pre-2012. The mindset at Dayton Children’s Hospital was “give the people what they love,” regardless of how healthy or unhealthy it was. For a time, the hospital was the biggest Pepsi account in the city of Dayton, Ohio, and Pepsi’s biggest slushy account in the US. During this time, a small group of employees met to discuss their respective professions’ response to the childhood overweight and obesity epidemic. They grew into a much larger multi-disciplinary team from across the hospital, including outpatient and inpatient nurses, social workers, psychologists, physicians, dietitians, and electronic medical records staff.

2012. The new president and CEO Deborah Feldman visited the cafeteria on her first day and noted: “The only healthy thing this place has is the salad bar, and at the end of the salad bar is cheesy bacon potato soup.” She started thinking about ways to improve the food options offered by the hospital. Her passion was born of the desire to lead by example – especially since Dayton Children’s was the only hospital in the area dedicated solely to the health of children.

Feldman invited the hospital’s director of clinical nutrition, the corporate director of dietetics nutrition and environmental sciences, and a leading physician from the hospital to the their “boot camp for a healthy hospital.” There, the team learned about a self-assessment tool produced by Prevention Partners, a non-profit organization in Chapel Hill, NC that addresses the leading causes of preventable disease with web-based assessment tools. The assessment tool helped Dayton Children’s assess their overall culture of wellness. They scored four Fs and a D on one Prevention Partners assessment tool.



2013. Given the hospital’s poor performance on the wellness assessment, the team recognized that changing their wellness culture would need to be a large-scale effort. Their mission was to explore how best to address the issue of health and wellness among staff, patients, and the community. The conversations led to the Healthy Way Initiative, which is comprised of four main areas:

- Hospital nutrition
- Employee well-being
- Education and advocacy
- Intervention and treatment

“It started with one small group and grew as people were invited into the conversation.”

– Rachel Riddiford, director of Clinical Nutrition

May 2014. As part of the Healthy Way Initiative, the hospital stopped offering sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) in the cafeteria, gift shop, vending machines, patient room service, and in on-site catering locations, although employees/patients could still bring SSBs from home. Importantly, sugar-sweetened beverages and flavored milk are still available for patients who need high-calorie diets, post-surgery patients, or when a provider writes an order for them.

Members of the Healthy Way Initiative team were in charge of specific responsibilities in regard to the rollout. Dietitians provided education and support; the dietetics and nutrition director helped execute and share the message with the staff directly impacted by the policy; the marketing department distributed the message more broadly to all staff, patients, and the community; and the leadership team helped reinforce the message and addressed complaints.

2014-2016. News about the Healthy Way Initiative was shared and through an article in the organizational newsletter, an educational display in the cafeteria, and use of focus groups with employees to help identify groups in need of re-education or training. An FAQ page on the hospital website was available to answer questions. Dayton Children’s repeated the Prevention Partners assessment, earning straight As. Interestingly, at a recent leadership meeting, an outside vendor mistakenly provided SSBs, but many were left untouched with participants preferring to drink water instead. “That wouldn’t have been the case six years ago. Maybe we’ve changed some behaviors,” said Rachel Riddiford, Director of Clinical Nutrition.



Challenges

The move to remove SSBs from Dayton Children’s Hospital was not without hurdles, which were focused on both the patient experience and the day-to-day satisfaction of employees who rely on the hospital cafeteria and vending machines. These included:

- **Concern for the patient experience:** Like many businesses, hospitals are driven by the patient (customer) experience. The role of sugary beverages in obesity was clear, so CEO Feldman was willing to deal with resistance to make a positive change.
- **Attitudes about personal choice:** The strongest negative feedback came from those who insisted that the decision of what to eat is a personal right and that removing SSBs is an infringement on that right. Ultimately, the hospital responded to these concerns by reiterating their commitment to children’s health and emphasizing the right of individuals to choose (while not profiting from that choice).
- **Concerns about sugar substitutes:** Dayton Children’s continues to offer beverages with non-nutritive sweeteners or sugar substitutes and sometimes receives feedback from parents and others who are concerned about reports of possible cancer risk from these sweeteners. To date, they have been responding by pointing out that there is no evidence that these sweeteners cause cancer at the levels consumed in human diets ⁽⁵⁾, even though the literature is clear about the negative health effects of SSBs, such as obesity and other chronic diseases. ^{(1) (2) (3)}
- **Concerns about decreased revenue:** Vending revenue decreased by 70%, and although they’re not back to pre-policy levels, sales have continued to creep back up. People are buying more water than before (sales are up 400%), in part because Dayton Children’s decreased the price of water to make it a more desirable option. They have continued to push their beverage provider to offer more sugar-free drinks besides diet sodas.

Lessons Learned

Dayton Children’s learned two primary lessons from the experience of going SSB-free:



- **Get buy-in from the top.** Having a collaborative CEO who believes in the SSB-free initiative and refuses to back down will make the process easier. The CEO needs to be willing to deal with resistance to change, especially considering the lost revenue from eliminating the sale of SSBs.
- **Messaging is key.** Lean heavily on the marketing department to distribute positive, simple, messaging that avoids shaming but outlines why health institutions should not profit from the sale of sugary drinks, which have been shown to contribute significantly to obesity, as well as other chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease.^{(1) (2) (3)} While sugary drinks are not directly linked to cancer risk, they do contribute to obesity, which in turn increases the risk of 13 types of cancer.⁽⁴⁾ Dayton Children's points to one example that was useful: they placed stickers on the soft drink machines to briefly explain why the decision was made.



Greenville Health System ⁽⁷⁾

Greenville Health System – SSB-free since 2015	
Locations	7, including 8 hospitals, and 155 affiliated practice sites
Food Service	5 cafeterias, 2 cafés, 4 franchises including Subway, Starbucks, Au Bon Pain, and Chick-fil-A
Employees	15,000+ total, including 1,500+ physicians/RNs/residents
Beds	1,662
Website	www.GHS.org

Timeline

2012. Medically based weight-loss program LoseWell began.

2013. The American Heart Association named Greenville Health System (GHS) a Fit-Friendly company, applauding its efforts to champion employee health.

A senior administrator/physician drafted a letter introducing the idea of reducing sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) at GHS. He pointed out the inconsistency of pushing to be a full-care health system and combating childhood obesity, yet still offering SSBs.

2014. A senior administrator/physician drafted a letter introducing a diverse task force of physicians, health educators, registered dietitians, community wellness screeners, conditioning specialists, and marketing/PR team members. Their conversations led to the ChooseWell program, an initiative designed to promote and support a culture of wellness throughout the organization.

Toward the end of the year, a committee of executive managers from all seven campuses approved the removal of SSBs without much resistance. The decision to remove SSBs was finalized in January 2015. Just three months later, any beverage with added sugar (including chocolate milk) had been removed from all vending machines, catering menus, and cafeterias.

2015. 100% fruit juices were still allowed, and employees/visitors were still permitted to bring in their own SSBs from home. Pre-existing contracts with franchises located within the Greenville Memorial Hospital allowed some of these businesses to continue offering SSBs.



GHS changed the default patient beverage from sweet tea to water, but otherwise, continued to keep SSBs on its patient menu for two main reasons: patient needs (e.g., someone on a diabetic clear liquid diet) and patient satisfaction.

The CEO discussed the ChooseWell program and SSB removal during the monthly town hall meeting, and a further explanation was provided in a staff-wide email. Moving forward, these topics were also covered in employee orientations.

2016. Dietitian-approved ChooseWell food options, denoted by a green thumbs-up logo or placed in a specific ChooseWell section, were added to all GHS cafeterias. Deep fryers were removed from most cafeterias and replaced with combination ovens that mimic the taste and texture of fried food but with less fat and fewer calories.

Today. The task force continues to push health initiatives, most recently taking on employee fitness levels by, among other things, placing posters near the elevators encouraging people to take the stairs.

“We’re giving them the choice [to be healthier]. Hopefully, where making the choice easier at work.” – Sam Reid, manager of Business Health and Wellness Services

Challenges

GHS encountered hurdles centered around non-compliance, decreased revenue, and employee frustration, including:

- **Non-compliant franchises.** GHS works within existing long-term franchise contracts, so when vendors refused to remove lemonade, sweet tea, and sugar-sweetened syrups from their menus, little could be done. The task force plans to revisit these contracts closer to their expiration date in 2028, but for now, it has created a ChooseWell menu to help people make healthier choices at each of these franchises.
- **Concerns about decreased revenue.** GHS initially faced a decrease in cafeterias sales, with employees and visitors opting to order from in-house franchises where they could purchase SSBs. However, about nine months after the launch of the ChooseWell program, people began returning to the cafeteria. An incentive program made good-for-you options less expensive,



and a short-term promotion allowed people to buy nine ChooseWell meals and get the 10th one free.

- **Concerns about sugar substitutes.** GHS continues to offer beverages with non-nutritive sweeteners or sugar substitutes and occasionally hears from people concerned about possible health effects related to these sweeteners. GHS takes the stance that current research supports the safety of these products and promises to continue to monitor the science and make policy adjustments if necessary. ⁽⁸⁾ ⁽⁵⁾ The Business Health Office also prints small cards with ChooseWell website information, which food service staff can give to visitors if they have a question about this decision.

Lessons Learned

GHS learned two primary lessons from the experience of going SSB-free:

- **Broaden the scope.** Pairing the SSB-free rollout with a broader food initiative may help to soften the blow. Highlight new food and beverage options (GHS introduced cold-pressed juices, sparkling waters, and sushi) as positive and healthy changes.
- **Celebrate diversity.** Task forces should include a range of employees in varying professions and roles, and possibly even members of the community, in order to get opinions “from people from all walks of life who can look at this from different perspectives,” said Sam Reid, manager of business health and wellness services. The GHS task force includes a vascular surgeon, multiple dietitians, a medical director, the business health medical director, a hospital CEO, the supervisor of group fitness and aquatics, the manager of business health and wellness services, the business health program and compliance manager, a director of food and nutrition, and a person from the public relations and marketing department.



Park Nicollet Health Services ⁽⁹⁾

Park Nicollet Health Services – SSB-free since 2016	
Overview	Park Nicollet Health Services is part of HealthPartners, a non-profit, integrated health care system in Minnesota.
Locations	29 in Minneapolis-St. Paul, including primary and specialty care clinics and hospitals
Food Service	2 cafeterias, 1 café, and 2 coffee shops all run internally, plus 1 contracted independent café.
Employees	About 8,000
Beds	426 at Park Nicollet Methodist Hospital
Website	www.ParkNicollet .com

Timeline

2012. On January 1, 2012, Park Nicollet Health Services finalized its merger with HealthPartners, a non-profit, integrated health care system in Minnesota.

2013. The push to remove sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) from Park Nicollet facilities began as a grassroots effort by one physician passionate about nutrition. Gathering fellow physicians, nurses, dietitians, and others interested in nutrition, this doctor organized meetings and conversations about how to move this policy forward. The employee-led group applied for and was awarded a grant from the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota to help further fund their nutritional goals.

In August 2013, Park Nicollet used the Center for Prevention grant money to hire a program manager dedicated to making overall nutrition a focus for the health care organization. Led by that program manager, more than 100 Park Nicollet team members and even some patients joined forces to create the Better Eating Collaborative, a group dedicated to inspiring patients, team members, and the community to embrace better eating. This group spearheaded the charge to stop the sale of SSBs throughout the Park Nicollet organization, which at that time included one hospital and approximately 20 clinics.



Park Nicollet phased out the majority of its SSBs, reaching 80% Better-For-You beverages (that is, beverages without added sugar). Because their food services are run internally and not by an outside vendor, the partial removal of SSBs was relatively smooth.

2014. Park Nicollet's grassroots effort paid off. In the spring of 2015, the Better Eating Collaborative received approval from leadership to go 100% SSB-free.

2015. In June 2015, an announcement was made that Park Nicollet Health Services would be 100% SSB-free as of January 1, 2016. The Better Eating Collaborative spent the rest of 2015 educating employees and the public about the reasons behind the change and what the change would mean.

2016. Park Nicollet went 100% SSB-free on January 1, 2016. Employees and guests were still allowed to consume SSBs if they brought them from home. At the same time, the food services department began promoting the salad bar and vegetables as good choices, and less healthy items (e.g., doughnuts and candy bars) were moved away from the highly-visible point-of-purchase locations into less prominent locations.

Today. Conversations about health and wellness continue. Park Nicollet plans to remove the deep-fat fryers in its cafeteria when the cafeteria is remodeled. HealthPartners more broadly continues to move toward the full elimination of SSBs.

Challenges

Incremental implementation made Park Nicollet's path to elimination easier, but it was not without hurdles:

- **Concerns about loss of revenue.** Soft drink sales are an easy source of revenue for health care organizations, and some people in leadership voiced strong reservations about the financial repercussions of removing SSBs. Initially, Park Nicollet did see lower sales numbers after implementation. However, sales rebounded and eventually surpassed former SSB figures because of the popularity of new beverage options offered in place of SSBs. Also, diet sodas remain available.
- **A lack of non-SSB options.** When Park Nicollet began its push to go SSB-free about five years ago, the number of non-SSB options was quite limited. As a result, it was difficult to keep the



vending machines stocked. Today, however, thanks to the increasing popularity of sparkling waters and other sugar-free drinks, there are many more choices.

Lessons Learned

Park Nicollet learned three primary lessons from the experience of going SSB-free.

- Don't rip off the band-aid.** Park Nicollet attributes the relative ease of its transition to the fact that SSBs were phased out, not removed all at once. By going 80% SSB-free two years before they removed all SSBs, proponents of the change were able to relay their message of health and get people used to the idea before it was fully in place. The main message, "We're not taking away your choice. We're doing this because we are a health care organization, and we need to act like one" said Gina Houmann, program manager. The slower rollout also meant that the dip in beverage sales was less severe.

- Promote open communication.** "The process can seem very daunting," Houmann said. "But it isn't that hard of a change to make if you're having the right conversations." Before

"Once we started having that conversation, people got it. As a health care organization, we should not be selling things that research shows go against health and can cause all these health conditions." – Gian Houmann, program manager

implementing an SSB-free policy, Park Nicollet had numerous internal discussions with members from different departments explaining the reason behind the change. They also had a communication plan in place, complete with a website, handouts with answers to FAQs, and plenty of research showing the negative health effects of sugary drinks. Having employees understand the issue and get on board with that prepared them to explain the decision when patients had questions.

- Maintain options.** Don't just remove SSBs; replace them with new beverage options that will get employees and visitors excited about what's available rather than focus on what's missing. Foodservice tradeshow are a great place to find ideas.



University of Wisconsin-Madison Health ⁽¹⁰⁾

University of Wisconsin-Madison – SSB-free since 2014	
Overview	Serves more than 600,000 patients each year in the upper Midwest and beyond
Locations	6 hospitals and more than 80 outpatient sites
Food Service	Independently operated
Employees	Approximately 1,500 physicians and 16,500 staff
Website	www.uwhealth.org

Timeline

2011. American Family Children’s Hospital, the Children’s Hospital within the UW Health system, participated in the Children’s Hospital Association’s Focus on a Fitter Future, a collaborative effort of 25 children’s hospitals across the US. This effort focused on health promotion and prevention strategies to address childhood obesity.

Interwoven in this work was the Healthy Hospital Environment Committee, which developed a suite of resources to assist hospitals in beginning a dialogue and instituting change in their institutions to improve the hospital environment. After taking a closer look, they were compelled to initiate change and align with the goals of a healthier hospital environment, starting with the transformation of the food culture at UW Health.

2013. UW Health drew inspiration from the CDC’s Toolkit for Creating Healthier Hospital Food, Beverage, and Physical Activity Environments and created a multi-disciplinary workgroup committed to establishing policies, systems, and environmental changes to provide nourishing food and beverages that promote healing and demonstrate cultural diversity. To assess all culinary service operations, they created a Healthy Food and Beverage Process Assessment tool to monitor the food and beverage environment for 1) product, 2) preparation, 3) portion size, 4) placement, 5) pricing, 6) promotion, and 7) purchasing practices. Retail venues are assessed quarterly, which inspires new initiatives and provides data to support those new initiatives.

2014. The dashboard and a thorough review of literature linking added sugars and health problems such as diabetes, obesity, and heart disease, proved helpful in making a case for removing sugar-



sweetened beverages. In October, UW Health removed all SSBs from retail and room service locations, and 60% of beverages offered did not contain a non-nutritive sweetener. Visitors and staff were allowed to bring in their own SSBs, but faculty and staff were encouraged to lead by example and make a commitment to their health. The mission to provide local, sustainable, and nourishing food and beverage items in all food venues continued with the removal of deep-fat fryers in December 2014.

2015. One year after removing SSBs from all UW Health locations, healthier options such as sparkling waters and infused teas made up nearly 50% of beverage sales organization-wide.

2017. Healthy food and beverage options continued to expand in all venues, which translated to consumers practicing healthier behaviors. Healthy beverage sales reached nearly 71%! Annually, the

“We have a pervasive desire to support and promote the health of our community.” – Amy Mihm MS, RDN, clinical nutrition specialist

workgroup reviews the literature on non-nutritive sweeteners and sugar substitutes. At present, the sweeteners used in diet sodas and other calorie-free options are deemed to be safe by the FDA.⁽⁸⁾

Today. UW Health’s focus is to be stewards of the environment by contributing to the local food system in environmentally, economically, and socially responsible ways.

Challenges

UW Health did extensive research and proactively addressed the challenges that removing SSBs would present, including a temporary decline in revenue.

They were well aware that changing consumer behavior would be challenging. They posted a series of educational messages to explain that this was a strategic and informed decision based on input from patients and families, as well as employee surveys.

UW Health also posted helpful tips to help patients and employees make behavioral changes and move away from soda. They used various tactics to inform several audiences, including posting articles on internal and external websites and social media; creating FAQs and comment cards; establishing a dedicated email inbox as a way to provide feedback, answer questions, and for



clarification; wrapping vending machines, and offering taste-testing of new products and vending machines.

Lessons Learned

UW Health learned three primary lessons from removing sugar-sweetened beverages.

- **Leadership commitment to change is critical.** Identify and collect important data that speak the language of key administrators who are essential in moving an initiative forward. UW Health successfully used its Healthy Food and Beverage Process Assessment tool to gather baseline data and then monitored consumer behaviors through sales revenue.
- **Recognize your champions.** Approaches to initiating changes to the food and beverage environment need to be as multifaceted as the change itself. The champions who can advocate for change from all perspectives can include clinicians, researchers, academics, business operators, marketers, and consumers.
- **Prioritize education and communication.** Since the front-line culinary services staff will most likely receive the majority of questions and feedback – both positive and negative – about the removal of SSBs, provide them with the necessary information to share about the change. Take steps to frequently educate consumers and offer samples of the healthy products that replace SSBs.

To assume there will be no consumer discord is short-sighted and may inflate the situation. UW Health has observed that most individuals express concerns about how this change will affect them personally. Once their voice has been heard, and after they have been invited to consider how this decision positively affects the health of a larger community of people, most come to accept why SSBs were removed.



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