



Initiatives Shaping Recreation Centre Food Environments in Canada

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August 2015

Introduction

Recently, Active Healthy Kids Canada released its annual report which indicated that only 5% of Canadian children and youth are getting enough daily physical activity – a shocking statistic considering how much we know about the health benefits of being physically active (1). As a busy society, we've managed to eliminate spontaneous movement and active play from our children's daily lives. With the collective motto "do more in less time", more children are being enrolled in organized sports as a way to offset the loss of active playtime (1).

As the trend of kids playing organized sports continues to grow, families will be spending more of their time at community recreation centres. While, these facilities are great at supporting physical activity, they are typically not conducive to healthy eating, an imbalance that is counterproductive from an overall health standpoint (2).

Unhealthy Food Environments

Research has confirmed that the food offered in Canadian recreation centres is not healthy. Naylor et al. conducted an extensive study to describe the public recreation food environment in British Columbia. A total of 77 audits representing 101 facilities made up the study sample. The findings were similar to results from other Canadian studies, confirming that the majority of foods and beverages served in these settings have a high caloric, low nutritional value (3). Most recreation centres have vending machines that offer mainly sugar sweetened beverages, and snack bars that offer deep fried foods and other 'treat' items such as chocolate bars and chips.



Challenges & Next Steps

Despite all of the programs, initiatives and guidelines outlined above, there is a relatively low policy adoption rate within Canada's recreation sector (3). A discrepancy seems to exist where recreation centre patrons indicate a desire for healthier food options, but operators express concern because 'healthy options' just aren't selling (2). Research has examined ways to overcome these barriers by studying various strategies (such as nudging and economic incentives) to improve the sale of healthy foods, but the results have been mixed indicating a need for more research in this area (4).

Recreation facility managers need education, resources and support in order to develop policies to promote healthy eating. Communities should share resources and success stories, and work together to develop strategies and action plans at the local level. More research is needed to evaluate the success of current municipal policies and inform action at the provincial level. Improving the recreation sector's food environment sends a clear message to users that a balanced lifestyle – combining physical activity with nutritious food – is the way to maintain optimal health.

References:

- 1) Active Healthy Kids Canada. Is Canada in the Running? The 2014 Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth. [Internet]. Toronto; 2014. [cited 2015 June 30]. Available from: http://dvqdas9jty7g6.cloudfront.net/reportcard2014/AHKC_2014_ReportCard_ENG.pdf
- 2) Thomas HM, Irwin JD. Food Choices in Recreation Facilities: Operators' and Patrons' Perspectives. *Canadian Journal of Dietetic Practice and Research*. 2010 Winter;71(4):180-5.
- 3) Naylor P, Bridgewater L, Purcell M, Ostry A, Wekken SV. Publically Funded Recreation Facilities: Obesogenic Environments for Children and Families? *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2010 05;7(5):2208-21.
- 4) Olstad DL, Goonewardene LA, McCargar LJ, Raine KD. Choosing healthier foods in recreational sports settings: a mixed methods investigation of the impact of nudging and an economic incentive. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*. 2014;11:6.

Overview of Canadian Programs, Policies and Guidelines

In Canada, there have yet to be any policies implemented at the provincial or territorial level aimed at regulating the nutrient quality of the food items sold at recreation centres. However, five provinces have published provincial guidelines or policy-making 'tool kits' to help community recreation centres improve their food environment. Municipal level programs, guidelines and even policies are being implemented as a way to improve the recreation centre food environment. Below are just some of the exciting initiatives happening across Canada:

British Columbia:

- *The Stay Active Eat Healthy*[®] program is an evidence-based capacity building initiative developed in BC. It aims to increase healthy food and beverages while restricting unhealthy options in municipal and community recreation facilities (5).
- *The Guidelines for Food and Beverages Available at Sporting Events* (6). This document is an educational and practical resource for foodservice operators who feed athletes and spectators at sporting events in BC. There are five guidelines, which focus on promoting healthy, well-planned, inclusive and safe food and beverage choices. The guide contains a criteria system of "choose most", "choose sometimes", and "choose least" foods (6).

Manitoba:

The Move to Healthy Choices Committee released *the Making the Move to Healthy Choices Toolkit* in 2008 and updated it again in 2015. The toolkit aims to encourage recreation facility operators to make a conscience decision to move towards healthier food choices in their local recreation facilities (7). The toolkit has sparked numerous recreation centers to create formal written policies at the municipal level such as the ones listed below:

- [Hamiota & District Sports Complex - Healthy Food And Beverage Policy](#)
- [Baldur Recreation Center - Healthy Food & Beverage Policy](#)
- [City of Thompson - Healthy Food and Beverage Policy for City of Thompson Facilities](#)

New Brunswick:

The New Brunswick government started taking action on healthy food choices in 2005 when they introduced *Policy 711: Healthier Foods and Nutrition in Public Schools*. Through a survey, they identified the most desirable options, which were fruit smoothies, fruit with yogurt dip, milk, bagels, sandwiches/wraps, vegetable sticks & dip (8). Based on the data that was gathered, the province went on to develop a resource kit for recreation facilities: *Healthy Eating in Recreation Facilities: It Just Makes Sense* with a goal to provide awareness, education and resources to encourage a greater availability of healthy food choices in New Brunswick's recreational facilities (8).

Ontario:

In 2013, The Eat Smart! Recreation Centre Program Implementation Toolkit stopped being coordinated provincially and instead was passed on to Public Health Units to adopt and implement as their own. Presently, individual health units and other organizations are supporting healthy eating in recreation centres by various activities such as (9):

- The Region of Peel Public Health's "*Healthy Eating Recreation Organization (HERO)*" working group
- The Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health (OSNPPH) launched a *Healthy Eating In Recreation Settings (HERS)* work group.

References:

- 5) Stay Active Eat Healthy. Rec Facilities. [Internet]. n.d. [cited 2015 August 5]. Available from: <http://stayactiveeathealthy.ca/managers/index.html>
- 6) Government of British Columbia. Guidelines for Food and Beverages Available at Sporting Events. [Internet]. 2014. [cited 2015 July 27]. Available from: http://www.cscd.gov.bc.ca/sport/pdf/Sporting_event_guidelines_FINAL_june2010.pdf
- 7) Brandon Regional Health Authority. Making the Move to Healthy Choices Toolkit. [Internet]. Available from: http://www.brandonrha.mb.ca/export/sites/brandonrha/galleries/pdf/Healthy_Living_Info/Making_the_Move_To_Healthy_Choices.pdf
- 8) Government of New Brunswick. Healthy Eating in Recreation Facilities: It Just Makes Sense. [Internet]. n.d. [cited 2015 July 27]. Available from: <http://www2.gnb.ca/content/dam/gnb/Departments/sd-ds/pdf/Wellness-MieuxEtre/HealthyFoods.pdf>
- 9) Stay Active Eat Healthy. Ontario. [Internet]. n.d. [cited 2015 August 5]. Available from: <http://stayactiveeathealthy.ca/provincial-links/ontario>