

Greenwich Time

Greenwich Hospital unveils color-coded menus to encourage healthier eating

Easy-to-follow guide introduced at Greenwich Hospital

By Lisa Chamoff
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Pork may be referred to as "the other white meat," but in Greenwich Hospital's Nutmeg Grill, it's considered red. And while spinach pie is filled with green, the entree is associated with yellow.

It's all part of a nutrition awareness program launched Monday at the hospital. In a partnership among nutritionists, chefs and the hospital's Center for Healthy Living, menu items in the main cafeteria and Garden Cafe have been color coded based on a combination of calories, fat, sodium and cholesterol, with green being the most healthy and red items recommended for consumption only sparingly.

Suzanne Magnotta, manager of nutrition services at the hospital, worked with its chef and food service manager over the last year to analyze recipes through a computer program and get their nutritional breakdown. Before coming up with the color system, they brought down the fat and decreased the sodium in some dishes.

For example, chef Rob Seavey now makes the popular chicken noodle soup with more vegetables and herbs. It was a challenge to balance nutrition with the flavor many people expect, he said.

"Most people add salt without even tasting

anything, and that was the hardest thing to take away, because people expect a certain amount of salt in their food," Seavey said.

Some portion sizes were also reduced. Usually, portions were up to 9 ounces, while they're now closer to 6 ounces.

The goal is to have just a quarter of the menu items be red. Currently 65 percent are green and yellow -- the middle rung in the hospital's nutrition ladder -- and 35 percent are red.

The idea was not to take away all the so-called "bad" choices, but make people more aware, said Tony Como, head of food services at the hospital. Some people may be surprised that a sandwich wrap has almost twice the calories of two slices of bread, or that a bagel is a 660-calorie breakfast.

"We're not trying to tell you what to eat," Como said. "It's really about choice."

The idea mirrors that of New York City's health department, which recently began requiring chain restaurants to include calorie counts right next to the foods listed on their menus. In July, Gov. M. Jodi Rell vetoed a similar effort in Connecticut.

The nutrition guidelines are part of an overall effort to encourage healthier lifestyles among hospital employees and patients, said Donna Gaudioso-Zeale, director of the hospital's Center for Healthy Living. That includes at the beginning of the year prohibiting smoking in all areas of the hospital campus, including outdoors, and providing help to staff interested in quitting.

"We are deliverers of health care and we're really trying to provide an environment conducive to living healthy," Gaudioso-Zeale said.

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The Nutmeg Grill entrees are listed, along with the associated colors, on a screen at the entrance to the cafeteria. For lunch on Monday afternoon, the jerk-marinated pork was listed as red, while the roasted Cornish hen and spinach pie had little yellow dots next to them.

For breakfast, the menu is a la carte, with items such as a fried egg, two slices of bread and a slice of cheese listed along with their nutritional content. As people put together a meal, the total number of calories in their selections corresponds to one of the colors.

Dressings for the salad bar, many of which are high in fat, can now be dished out in specially sized ladles, and they are labeled with amount of fat and calories per ladle.

As she dressed her salad with olive oil and balsamic vinegar, Wendy Gottlieb, a respiratory therapist at the hospital, said that although she tends to make healthy food choices, the new system is helpful. She was surprised to learn that some of the soups she usually gets for a healthy meal were higher in calories and fat than she thought.

"They're good reminders," Gottlieb said. "It forces you to look at the numbers and make good decisions."

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