

Off the trolley

Hospital food is still a postcode lottery. We look at the winners and losers – and what you can do to improve the odds of eating well

At one breakfast I asked if it was possible to get some decent protein such as eggs. The server said, “Sure, love...at Tesco!” Unfortunately, this quote from one patient in our survey on hospital food was all too typical. As the illustration, right, shows, only 35 per cent of NHS patients in our survey found hospital food tasty, 42 per cent thought it healthy and just 29 per cent found it appetising.

Yet Florence Nightingale recognised the importance of food in patients' recovery in 1860, and modern research has confirmed her theories. Poorly fed patients tend to stay longer in hospital, experience more complications and are at greater risk of dying than well-fed patients with the same illness.

Six in ten elderly malnourished

So nutrition should be a vital part of treatment, not a mere afterthought. But the charity Age Concern believes that as many as six in ten older patients are at risk of becoming malnourished in hospital because nursing staff are too busy to help them eat. And it's not just elderly patients – as Haluk Tarkan discovered (see opposite).

‘How new mums are supposed to stay healthy in hospital is a mystery to me’

Debbie Dzik-Jurasz of the Royal College of Nursing agrees that lack of staff is a problem, and told us that top of her wish list for improvements in hospital food would be ‘having enough nurses on duty to provide appropriate support’.

A simple measure that can help is the red tray scheme. Patients who need help with eating are served food on a red tray so that staff can easily identify and help them. We'd like to see more hospitals using this idea.

Inflexible mealtimes

The hospital routine can also cause patients to go hungry, when consultants' ward rounds or a trip to the X-ray department clash with meal times. Our survey showed that patients prefer having more flexible eating times – something that private hospitals seemed more likely to get right.

In 2001 the government introduced the Better Hospital Food (BHF) programme, and ring-fenced £38.5 million to implement it. There were three main aims – to introduce new standardised recipes in NHS hospitals, and to provide patients with a printed menu and 24-hour catering so that they can eat when they want. As a result,

more NHS trusts now avoid ward rounds and medical procedures during meal times, and more hospitals have introduced snack boxes and options for patients to eat food outside normal meal times. But 88 per cent of NHS patients in our survey still had meals at fixed times.

There is also inflexibility in the type of food served. Several patients with diabetes or food allergies had problems in the NHS. One patient in our survey told us: ‘I'm diabetic, but I wasn't asked and I had to tell the staff. Even so, I was still offered sticky toffee pudding and sugared cereals. The only alternative to a sweet was cheese – no fruit was available as it had run out.’

Mothers' mutiny

Patients fighting infection may need more calories than a healthy person. New mothers also need extra calories – and flexible mealtimes – when breastfeeding, but in our survey this group was particularly unimpressed with hospital food. Around a quarter found the portions too small, and over half of those in maternity wards were left hungry after their meal. Others, like Andrea Gibbs (see left), found the food too stodgy.

One woman told us: ‘Despite the drive for new mothers to breastfeed, the meals were very small and drinks and snacks were

PRIVATE
Tasty **76%**
Healthy **72%**
Appetising **76%**



‘I FELT TOTALLY CARBED OUT’

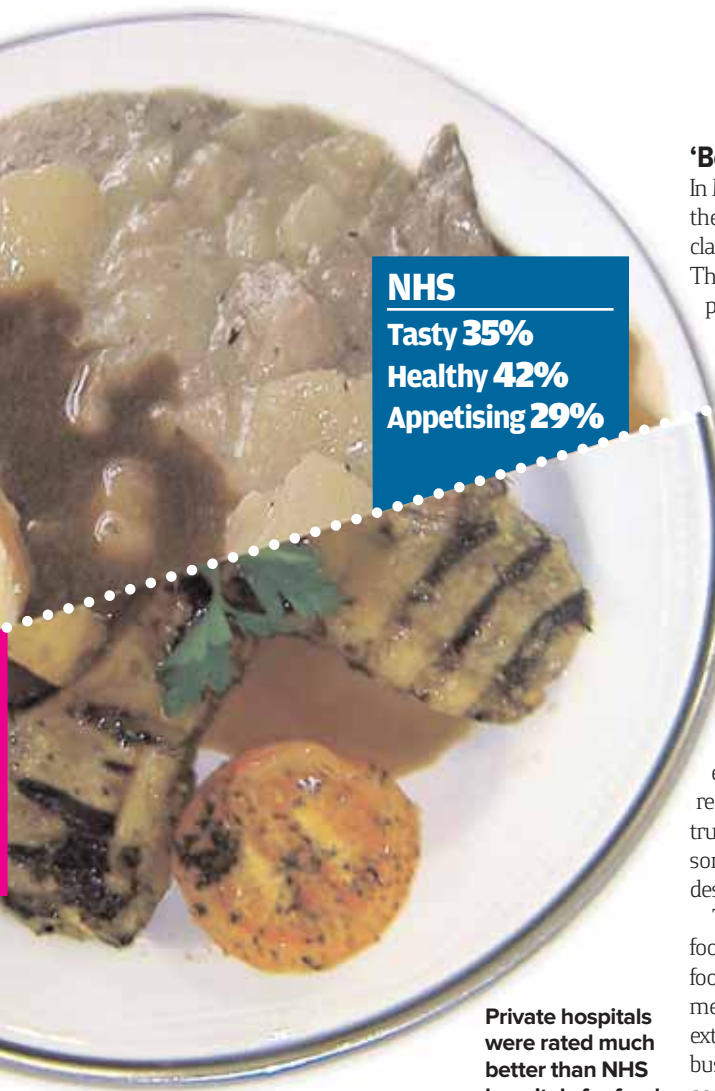
Andrea Gibbs 35,

full-time mum

In March 2005 *Which?* reader Andrea Gibbs stayed in Pembury hospital in Kent for four days when she gave birth to her daughter. She was not complimentary about the food: ‘Breakfast was an acceptable DIY job in the kitchen (make your own toast, tea and bowl of cereal), but the lunch and dinner served from a hot trolley were less than impressive. One day I was given macaroni cheese with potatoes and baked beans. I felt completely carbed out! And there was tapioca for pudding...’

NHS

Tasty 35%
Healthy 42%
Appetising 29%



Private hospitals were rated much better than NHS hospitals for food in our survey

'Better food' scheme scrapped

In May this year, the government brought the BHF programme to an abrupt end, claiming to be 'delighted' with its success. The funding previously allocated to it has passed directly to the NHS to use however it likes. But as the current financial crisis deepens, trusts are looking for ways to cut costs – and food is seen as an easy target. Alison McCree of the Hospital Caterers Association told us: 'Within days of the BHF programme ending, many trusts were demanding catering managers reduce their budgets by 5 per cent.'

With an average spend of £2.60 a patient a day on food and drink in English NHS hospitals, there's little room for cuts. Staff at a hospital in Northumberland Tyne and Wear NHS Trust recently staged a protest at apparent cuts that meant that patients would receive fewer potatoes and vegetables. The trust denied this and said that it had 'made some small changes to the menus... designed to reduce wastage of food'.

The budget has a big impact on how food is prepared. Some hospitals still cook food on site. Others receive chilled or frozen meals from one central kitchen or from external suppliers, or contract out the whole business to private companies. Around 37 per cent of food for NHS patients is provided by the commercial sector, and a third of

meals are now purchased ready-prepared.

By contrast, private hospitals spend more money – nearer £10 a day – and cook food from fresh ingredients. Kevin Mochrie from Bupa explains: 'This lets us control the quality of our food and respond to individual requirements. We try to make meals as attractive and nutritious as possible.'

How clean is your kitchen?

Wherever the food comes from, most of us expect the kitchens to be spotlessly clean. But when we looked at hygiene inspection reports for the past three years for 50 UK hospitals, we found some shocking results.

The same issues cropped up time and again – dirty or mouldy equipment, cockroach infestations, no soap or hot water at hand basins, and cold food not properly refrigerated while hot food was kept at luke-warm temperatures that bugs love.

Some disturbing examples include:

- food fridges on wards being used to store medical supplies (Leicester Royal Infirmary in May 2004 and Royal Cornwall Hospital, Triliske, in December 2003)
- hot meals for elderly patients at the Mansion House Unit in Glasgow repeatedly failing to meet the minimum legal temperature of 63°C in September 2004 and August 2005
- out-of-date foods, inadequate kitchen ventilation, mice infestations, and staff not following food safety procedures at the

not provided.' Another complained: 'There were very strict meal times – I did not eat for over 24 hours because I was in labour with my first child. I had the baby at 5am and then had to wait until 9am before I was offered any food – I was absolutely starving!' A third said: 'Meals would be delivered at strange times and then were cleared away uneaten because I'd been trying to breastfeed or catch up on sleep. How new mums are supposed to stay healthy in hospital is a mystery to me.'

Our research

In June and July 2006 we carried out an online survey of 833 *Which?* members who had stayed in hospital during the past 12 months: 70 per cent had been an NHS patient in an NHS hospital, 25 per cent private patients in a private hospital and 5 per cent private patients in an NHS hospital. Thanks to all who took part.

'I LOST MORE THAN TWO STONE'

Haluk Tarkan 46

Which? reader Haluk Tarkan spent four weeks in the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery, London, in March 2004. Haluk's wife Carla told us: 'For most of that time, he couldn't eat anything apart from liquid food with a straw, as he had a broken jaw. The soup wasn't always liquefied, so we had to use a sieve to remove solids ourselves. Staff told me to buy sachets of soup.'

It was at least a week before Haluk was seen by a dietitian, who organised a diet of special

milkshakes. But these weren't provided by the catering staff, and the nurses often forgot to bring them unless Carla reminded them. Even when Haluk was a little better and could eat puréed food, there was little to eat apart from mashed potato.

Haluk – whose injuries meant he had difficulty speaking for the first couple of weeks – lost more than two stone during his stay. He says the experience was a nightmare: 'I can't imagine what would have happened if Carla hadn't been there for every meal.'



Maudsley Hospital in south London in 2004 and 2005. In December 2005 and January/February 2006 the kitchen was closed for repairs, and local environmental health officers are now happy with it. ISS Mediclean, the private company responsible for the catering, refused to give us more information on the inspections, claiming that, as a private company, it isn't bound by freedom of information legislation. We've asked the Information Commissioner's Office to investigate.

One environmental health officer told us it can be tricky to resolve problems involving several organisations: 'The ultimate responsibility is on the company carrying out the food business, but we have to recognise that it may have to negotiate with an

'Food is an essential part of treatment and it should be enjoyable to eat as well'



Recipe for success: Mike Duckett at Royal Brompton Hospital

NHS trust to sort out structural problems.'

Other hospitals show that it's possible to keep kitchens clean. Several hospitals got honourable mentions, and inspectors at the Belford Hospital in Fort William in July 2005 concluded: 'It's evident from the standards and records examined that the head cook and all food handlers work extremely hard to maintain such [high] standards.'

Success story

When hospitals do make an effort with the food, patients notice. One patient in our survey said: 'I've been in three hospitals in the past six months, and the food at the Royal Brompton Hospital was much better than the others.' The trust running this specialist heart

WHAT DO PATIENTS REALLY THINK?

When we asked you to tell us about your experience of hospital food, many of you felt you shouldn't expect too much. As one patient summed up: 'Given the state of the NHS, I was grateful to get what I did.'

Most private patients were more positive about hospital food than those in the NHS: 57 per cent of private patients were very satisfied with the overall quality, compared with only 18 per cent of NHS patients. More results are shown below.

Meals at fixed times

'There was a long gap between dinner (6.30pm) and breakfast (8.30am) and as I'm an early riser (awake by 6am at the latest) I was famished by the time breakfast came'



NHS 88%

PRIVATE 64%

Always shown a menu

'There was some choice but always the same menu, ie the choices were the same each day'

NHS 59%

PRIVATE 86%

NHS 29%

PRIVATE

Had to order food the day before

'On admission, you generally got another patient's meal that they had ordered when in the bed before you, or you had to take pot luck. When I was admitted, toast was the only option'

NHS 53%

PRIVATE 18%

PRIVATE

and lung hospital in London also came in the top 20 per cent of NHS trusts for food in the Healthcare Commission's 2005 survey.

The catering manager, Mike Duckett, and his team cook most of the food on site. Fresh, seasonal produce – 15 per cent of which is local and organic – is delivered three times a week. Sustain, an alliance that promotes better food and farming, helped Mike get in touch with local suppliers.

Mike's daily budget is around £3.50 a patient (higher than the average of £2.60). But he doesn't always go for the cheapest option. He explained: 'I threw out the cheap, nasty bread and switched to more expensive, better-quality bread. But it costs us less

overall because it's more filling, so patients eat less of it. And if you use the cheapest mince, the quantity shrinks so much when you cook it because of the fat you lose that you end up buying more than if you'd gone for pricier, leaner and healthier mince.'

Ditching powdered soup and making it from scratch increased demand by 40 per cent. 'Not only do patients love the soup, but we also sell a lot more to staff and visitors at a higher price than the powdered stuff. The extra profit goes back into providing better food for patients.'

Mike believes you can't beat producing food on site. It gives a flexibility that other hospitals don't have: 'When children are ill,

The Department of Health claims that the annual patient environment action team (Peat) survey of hospital food shows big improvements. The most recent survey in 2006 found that 91.6

per cent of all hospitals are now rated either excellent or good for their food. But the Peat survey doesn't ask patients what they think – and, since 2005, hospitals have assessed themselves.

By contrast, the Healthcare Commission's survey of patients shows consistent ratings for hospital food since 2002: only 54 per cent of patients in 2005 rated it as very good or good.

Thought portion size was just right

'As portions were so large, I tried to request half a portion of two main courses to create a more balanced meal. I was told I wasn't allowed to do this and was reprimanded by the dinner lady!'



NHS 66%

PRIVATE 91%

Always got the food they ordered

NHS 53%

PRIVATE 88%



Still hungry after meals

'I work at the place where I was an in-patient, and I was surprised at how small the patients' portions were compared with canteen portions'

4%



NHS 15%

PRIVATE 62%

Satisfied if served up same quality of food in a restaurant

'The so-called "celebrity chef's choice" was probably a little tastier, but certainly would not be eaten by the chef concerned!'

Access to hot and cold drinks, day and night

'We had to pay for tea and coffee other than one cup at breakfast'

NHS 15%

47%

NHS 13%

PRIVATE 43%

Sufficient variety of food

'I had to have meat/chicken with carrots, beans and gravy twice a day for three days. The only other choice was sandwiches or a salad'



just getting them to eat anything can be a challenge. So kids can make requests for pretty much anything.

'When it comes to hospital food, the emphasis needs to be on what patients want. Food is an essential part of their treatment, and it should be enjoyable to eat as well.'

SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES

We'd like to hear about your time as a patient – not just about the food but the whole experience (see p79). If you would like to fill in our questionnaire on this issue, go to www.which.co.uk/patientexperience

No nutrition standards

The NHS serves 300 million meals a year, costing over £500 million. Yet there are currently no nutritional standards for hospital food. The Food Standards Agency is working on guidelines but could not confirm a publication date as we went to press.

Around 40 per cent of patients are thought to be

malnourished on admission – and 70 per cent of those are in a worse nutritional condition when discharged. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence has issued guidance on how to tackle this, and wants England and Wales to follow Scotland and test patients for malnutrition on admission.

Which? says

Our survey shows a high level of dissatisfaction with food in NHS hospitals. Food must be regarded as a vital part of treatment rather than as an add-on. The government must implement and monitor nutrition standards throughout the NHS. We will be sending our findings to the Department of Health and the Food Standards Agency, urging them to act.

Checklist

How to eat well in hospital

■ **Hygiene** To check results of hospital hygiene inspections, contact your local council. A few councils publish this information online, but for others you may have to send a request under freedom of information legislation. See www.which.co.uk/foodregulation for advice and a template letter.

■ **Patient views** Have a look at the in-patient survey at www.healthcarecommission.org.uk to see how patients rated your local hospital trusts.

■ **Eat well before you go in** If you know you will be going into hospital, make sure you eat a healthy and balanced diet with plenty of fruit and veg in the weeks before you're admitted.

■ **Tell staff about any dietary needs** Don't assume that medical staff will know about any dietary needs (even those due to other conditions you may have, such as diabetes).

■ **Fresh supplies** Ask visitors to bring in fresh fruit, especially if you're on a maternity ward.

■ **Carers take care** If you're spending a lot of time in hospital as a carer (maybe as a parent of a child in hospital), don't neglect your own diet. Not all hospital canteens/vending machines have many healthy options.