



# Potluck dinners

What you think about hospital canteen food; plus results of our spot checks on quality, nutrition and choice in hospitals around the UK

**H**ospitals are supposed to improve people's health, so you might expect them to serve healthy, nutritious food.

In the past, we've found poor-quality food being served to patients. Now we've discovered that standards in hospital canteens for staff, visitors and outpatients fare little better.

The NHS is the largest employer in the UK, with around 1.5 million staff. It serves more than 300 million meals a year, many to staff, visitors and outpatients in the hospital canteen.

One member, who spent a lot of time in hospital with her husband when he had heart surgery, told us: 'Lots of dishes in the canteen were served with chips and high in fat. This surprised me, as the hospital is dedicated solely to heart surgery.'



She is among the 94% of members we surveyed who said that hospitals should make it easy to buy healthy food (see 'Our research', opposite).

When we tested meals from 21 hospitals around the UK – against Food Standards Agency (FSA) guidelines for

food served in public institutions – we found high levels of salt in 18 of them (see 'Hospital meals on test', p32).

Although our team of dietitians told us that they'd be happy to eat in 16 of the 21 canteens, spotting healthy food often requires a 'discerning eye'.

In our survey of almost 1,700 members, 47% said the quality of hospital canteen food is excellent or good. But 19% were disappointed with what they can buy.

We spoke to one father whose son was premature and stayed in a special care unit. He recalled: 'I had to stay close, so was forced to eat in the canteen. I found the food bland and fairly inedible – I wasn't expecting Gordon Ramsay, just something palatable. After a week, I was so fed up that I resorted to yogurts and crisps.'

Ninety per cent of our respondents have eaten in hospital canteens because of convenience – 10% of them being hospital staff.

## WHAT'S ON THE MENU?

We sent dietitians to check out catering facilities at 21 hospitals across the UK. Of the 21 visited, 20 hospitals had a visitor canteen or restaurant. The 20 canteens served at least three hot meals alongside jacket potatoes and sandwiches. Seventeen also had a salad bar.

The other hospital, New Cross in Wolverhampton, had outlets where food, including microwaveable meals, jacket potatoes and sandwiches, was available.

## Dietary needs

One in four people we surveyed have specific dietary requirements, such as low-fat or vegetarian diets. Three out of

Stoke's Hospital NHS Foundation Trust



four of those were able to meet their requirements in their hospital canteen.

Vegetarian hot meals were sold at all hospitals visited, but in 13 cases they were cheese-based and high in fat – three of them were cauliflower cheese. One member told us: 'Vegetarian options are always based on cheese or egg, so variety is limited.'

Our consultant dietitian, Luci Daniels, felt that these dishes 'lacked imagination, especially when there are so many acceptable choices'.

Also, options for more specific dietary needs, such as vegan, gluten-free or low salt, weren't signposted.

## Labelling

Three hospitals we visited provided nutrition labelling, making it easier for people to choose healthier options. East Surrey Hospital and Antrim Area

**Three quarters of Which? members say fast food outlets shouldn't be allowed**



## Which? online Kids' food

Making food fun is key to a great diet, according to parents who've added tips to our online guide on getting children to eat healthier foods.

Visit [www.which.co.uk/kidshealthyeating](http://www.which.co.uk/kidshealthyeating) for their advice on growing your own, providing homemade treats and giving rewards for healthy eating.



## THE CHOICE IS (SOMETIMES) YOURS

**Judy and John Lea** 57 and 61, retired facilities manager and architect, Maldon, Essex

John Lea has had two kidney operations at Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge within the past four years, so the couple regularly return for his treatments and checkups.

Judy says: 'It's 60 miles away so I can't pop home to eat. For three months after the first operation I was dependent on the hospital for most of my food.'

Addenbrooke's has a canteen, Burger King, pizza restaurant and jacket-potato shop, as well as a Ritazza

coffee shop, grocery and newsagents for snacks.

Judy is glad that there are alternatives to Burger King and she's impressed with the healthy options on offer elsewhere, telling us that 'they're very good at salads and fruit'.

But there is one bugbear: 'Even such a large hospital has little to offer out of hours. Most places shut at around 5pm, so choice gets much more limited. Even the main canteen shuts by 7.30pm.'

And although some hospitals, such as Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast, had plenty of fresh fruit, others, such as Warrington Hospital in Cheshire, had 'unappetising old, wrinkly apples', according to our dietitian.

### Chips with everything

Chips featured highly on menus. In 11 canteens, more than a third of carbohydrate options were fried or oily, such as chips or roast potatoes.

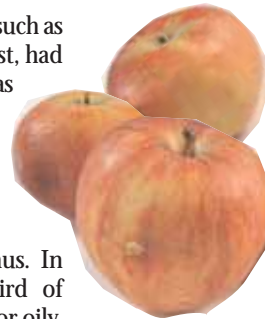
And every hospital provided free salt sachets, while some had salt shakers on each dining table – despite government campaigns to reduce salt intake.

### Snack attack

Although confectionery and snacks such as chocolates and crisps were available in all of the canteens, our dietitians reported that they were discreetly placed or not given prominence over healthier foods and snacks in 13 canteens.

In eight canteens, snacks such as chocolates and crisps outweighed the healthier options and were often placed close to the till.

In the three Scottish hospitals visited, there were more high-fat and high-salt pastries, pies and sausage rolls compared with the other hospitals around the UK. However, this year the Scottish government announced that it will be introducing nutrition standards



## OUR RESEARCH

In July 2008, we surveyed 1,694 Which? members who had eaten in a hospital canteen in the previous 12 months.

We recruited seven dietitians through the British Dietetic Association to carry out our inspections – each visited three large hospitals in a region of the UK in June 2008. For each one, they completed a questionnaire about food available throughout the hospital. They also bought a meat-based main meal of the day, or the first choice on the menu, with any side servings, which was then sent to labs for nutritional testing.

We asked a consultant dietitian, Luci Daniels, to assess the findings.

The hospitals visited were:

**Scotland:** Glasgow Royal Infirmary; Western Infirmary, Glasgow; Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh.

**North:** Warrington Hospital; Salford Royal; Manchester Royal Infirmary.

**Midlands:** Manor Hospital, Walsall; Birmingham Heartlands Hospital; New Cross Hospital, Wolverhampton.

**South-east:** East Surrey Hospital; Frimley Park Hospital, Surrey; University College Hospital, London.

**South-west:** Royal United Hospital, Bath; Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital; Bristol Royal Infirmary.

**Wales:** Royal Gwent Hospital; Royal Glamorgan Hospital; University Hospital of Wales.

**Northern Ireland:** Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast; Belfast City Hospital; Antrim Area Hospital.

Hospital use adapted versions of the FSA's traffic-light labelling scheme, so people can watch out for the red, less healthy choices.

The Royal Glamorgan Hospital in Wales also provided nutrition labelling, but our dietitian reported that it was 'on a separate board and in very small print'.

Only four of the 21 canteens labelled a healthy option on their menu – a possible concern for outpatients who need a reduced-salt or reduced-fat diet.

Five of the hospitals were promoting healthy eating around their buildings. One dietitian was especially impressed with signs at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, which said: 'Buy fresh fruit today instead of confectionery.'

### Fruit and veg

To help people maintain a healthy diet, it's good practice for hospital canteens to include vegetables or salad with meals, but only five of the 21 did.

Sixteen canteens charged between 30p and 90p extra for a portion of vegetables or salad – on meals already costing between £2.50 and £5. Some vegetables were poor quality. For example, the dietitian visiting the Western Infirmary in Glasgow described the vegetables on offer as 'soggy'.







## HOSPITAL MEALS ON TEST

The wide differences in nutrition between hot meals available in the hospitals we visited can be shown by comparing beef lasagne meals, which were available at four hospitals, with each other and against FSA guidelines on food served in public institutions

### What we found in hospital lasagnes

Lab testing revealed significant differences in the nutritional values between beef lasagne meals bought by our dietitians



**Edinburgh Royal Infirmary**  
lasagne (with salad and garlic bread)



**Manchester Royal Infirmary**  
lasagne (with vegetables)



**New Cross Hospital**  
lasagne (with salad)



**Antrim Area Hospital**  
lasagne (with vegetables)



**FSA guidelines<sup>a</sup>**  
lunch (meal, dessert and drink)

<b>Weight (g)</b>	<b>450</b>	<b>377</b>	<b>448</b>	<b>396</b>	<b>n/a</b>
<b>Calories (Kcal)</b>	<b>644</b>	<b>377</b>	<b>497</b>	<b>543</b>	<b>667</b>
<b>Fat (g)</b>	<b>32.4</b>	<b>9.8</b>	<b>20.6</b>	<b>25.7</b>	<b>25.2</b>
<b>Sat fat (g)</b>	<b>13.1</b>	<b>4.5</b>	<b>10.8</b>	<b>12.7</b>	<b>7.8</b>
<b>Salt (g)</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>3.6</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>1.74</b>

<sup>a</sup> FSA guidelines, on food served in public institutions, say that for a diet based on three meals and two snacks a day, lunch including a main meal, dessert and drink should contain a maximum of the nutritional values outlined above

Our testing shows that, without nutritional labelling, it's hard to know what you're eating in a canteen. The salt values were all too high. Fat and saturated fat values differed considerably – by more than double the amount in some cases.

Based on the FSA's guidelines, and considering our meals didn't contain a dessert and drink, out of 21 meals:

- 11 contained too much fat
- 14 contained too much saturated fat and
- 18 contained too much salt.

There were some good results, however: although pies are often high in fat, one meal at the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital – of beef and mushroom pie, new potatoes, cabbage and gravy – met FSA guidelines for fat and saturated fat.

and removing sugary drinks from vending machines in Scottish hospitals over the next three years.

### After hours

Our dietitians also looked at other food available in the 21 hospitals. Some had kiosks selling sandwiches and hot drinks, while others had food courts with chains including Pasta King and Upper Crust.

Although none of the hospitals in our investigation had branches of

McDonald's and Burger King, members we surveyed complained about them being in hospitals. Seventy-seven per cent of respondents said that they shouldn't be allowed.

One respondent said: 'NHS hospitals should spearhead healthy eating and ban sweet and caffeinated drink dispensers.'

Seventeen hospitals had vending machines selling crisps and chocolate, while six also had machines with healthier items such as fruit, nuts and crackers.

The dietitian visiting Royal Glamorgan Hospital in Wales said there was a vending area with nine machines, none of which contained any healthy items for sale.

In March the Welsh Assembly government said that crisps, chocolate and sugary drinks would be removed from vending machines in its hospitals over the following six months.



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[www.which.co.uk/healthcarestandards](http://www.which.co.uk/healthcarestandards)



### WHICH? SAYS

Hospitals have a responsibility to serve and promote healthy food. Although our investigation revealed some examples of good practice, it was patchy.

By offering more options containing less fat, sugar and salt, with better sign-posting and labelling, hospitals could help consumers lead healthier lifestyles.

We're not against treats being available, but we'd like to see nutritious options promoted, so the healthy choice becomes the easy choice.

