A hospital is a busy workplace, one where most employees work irregular hours and where hundreds of people visit daily. For these individuals, vending machines may mean the only convenient source of food or drink on any given day. The American Heart Association is working with Crozer-Chester Medical Center to boost the percentage of healthy items offered in the hospital’s snack and beverage machines by the end of summer 2017. The effort partly reflects a growing demand from consumers who want to make healthier choices when it comes to eating, particularly in public places. Adding more nutritious options in vending machines also is a way to help combat the rise of obesity, diabetes and other diet-based illnesses.

The Challenge
Crozer-Chester Medical Center is the only major health facility for the roughly 34,000 residents in the town of Chester, Pennsylvania. There are six vending machines in the hospital: four that sell snacks and two that offer beverages. A survey conducted on the hospital’s vending machines by the American Heart Association (AHA)’s Accelerating National Community Health Outcomes through Reinforcing (ANCHOR) Partnerships Program staff found that 77 percent of the foods sold in the four snack machines were unhealthy as they failed to meet the AHA’s healthy food and beverage guidelines. An additional 22 percent of the items met some dietary standards, but do not meet the recommended levels of sodium and sugar. The two beverage machines inside the medical center also fared poorly: 72 percent of the drinks offered were classified as unhealthy.

“We are thrilled to be working with Crozer-Chester Hospital on increasing healthy options in their vending machines. The hospital serves not only as a medical hub but as a community hub for the city of Chester.”

– Jennifer Litchman, Community Health Director-Philadelphia, American Heart Association

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The Solution

The AHA partnered with Crozer-Chester Medical Center to implement a healthy vending policy. The AHA’s ANCHOR team earned the support of the Crozer-Chester Medical Center president, who backed the effort to increase the percentage of healthier foods and beverages offered in the hospital’s six vending machines. The AHA then worked with the medical center’s lead nutritionist to guide hospital vendors as they began to substitute products high in fat, sugar, salt and calories with dried fruits, whole-grain chips and other healthier options. The AHA recommends that at least 50 percent of all snacks and beverages stocked in vending machines meet federal nutritional standards for healthy food and beverages.

Sustaining Success

The AHA is providing training and technical assistance on steps to take to improve the nutritional quality of snack machine selections. Next steps include planning a series of taste tests to the medical center employees so they can sample some of the healthier products available for sale. The hospital also will work to reduce the sugary and highly caloric drinks in its two beverage machines so that at least half of all the drinks sold are considered healthy and fall within the AHA’s healthy food and beverage guidelines.

Policy, System and Environmental Change

Hospitals are health hubs that are expected to set an example for their patients and visitors. The healthy vending policy to be implemented by Crozer-Chester Medical Center will help change the facility’s food environment by improving the availability of more wholesome foods and drinks. While offering more nutritious options in its vending machines won’t prevent hospital employees, patients or visitors from making unhealthy food choices, it does increase their access to healthier snacks and beverages and promotes a broader culture of public and workplace health.

Results

Most people want to eat healthier. Studies show that people tend to eat what is available, which is why snack and drink machines found throughout the Crozer-Chester Medical Center have begun to offer more healthier options. Snacks lower in salt, fat and calories are replacing unhealthier options, while beverages low in sugar will soon replace some of the sugar-sweetened beverages currently offered. The changes mean a healthier food environment for the employees at Crozer-Chester that use any of the hospital’s four snack and two beverage machines. Additionally, the new vending policy also has the potential to impact the lives of tens of thousands of visitors and patients who enter the hospital doors each year.

Get Involved

The American Heart Association’s ANCHOR Partnership program is working in Chester, Pennsylvania, to increase healthy food and beverage options for residents. To learn more about these efforts, including those to increase healthy vending options, please check out www.heart.org/hearthealthycheser.