

GOOD SHEPHERD FOOD BANK OF MAINE | CUMBERLAND AND PENOBSCOT COUNTIES, MAINE

Sodium Reduction Efforts at Maine Food Pantries

Problem

American consumers have little control over the high sodium in processed foods, making it difficult to reduce the amount of sodium in their diets. It's even more challenging for food-insecure Mainers who cannot afford to purchase groceries and therefore rely on food pantries to feed the household.

Project

The Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention partnered with Good Shepherd Food Bank (GSFB), Portland Public Health in Cumberland County, and Bangor Public Health and Community Services in Penobscot County to increase availability of and access to lower sodium foods distributed from GSFB to local food pantries.

Outcome

GSFB sodium reduction efforts have reached 5,318 low-income Mainers in Cumberland and Penobscot counties and up to 160,000 more through the statewide network of partners and pantries. Eight of 15 core food items that GSFB purchases are now lower in sodium, with a 53% overall average sodium reduction.

Resources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Salt www.cdc.gov/salt
- Good Shepherd Food Bank of Maine www.gsfb.org
- Maine Cardiovascular Health Program www.mainehearthealth.org

Statement of Problem: The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that about 90% of Americans consume too much sodium¹—most of it from commercially processed and restaurant foods.² High sodium intake is associated with elevated blood pressure, which increases the risk of heart disease and stroke, the second and fifth leading causes of death in Maine.³ Data collected in 2013 show that the prevalence of high blood pressure is higher in Maine (33.3%) than the United States overall (31.4%).⁴



American consumers have little control over the sodium content in processed foods, making it difficult to reduce the amount of salt in their diets. It is even more challenging for food-insecure Mainers who have chronic illnesses such as obesity, high blood pressure, and diabetes, and limited access to nutritious foods. Food pantries are an important resource for these individuals and families.

Project Description: The Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Maine CDC) selected food pantries in Cumberland and Penobscot counties as sites for sodium reduction efforts to help ensure that some of Maine's neediest people, including children, adults, seniors, and veterans, would get nutritious food.

The Maine CDC developed strategies for reducing the amount of sodium in popular foods that are purchased and distributed by Good Shepherd Food Bank (GSFB), a statewide food bank that distributes food to its network of partner agencies, including food pantries and meal sites.

The program's objectives were to:

1. Improve the food environment in local food pantries that carry out interventions addressing the availability of low sodium foods.
2. Increase the selection or purchase of lower sodium food items by populations that use food pantries.
3. Reduce sodium intake in populations that use food pantries.

Outcomes: Of the foods that GSFB purchases for distribution, eight staples that could be replaced with lower sodium options were identified: peanut butter, macaroni and cheese, spaghetti sauce, beef stew, baked beans, turkey hot dogs, vegetable beef soup, and tomato soup. Some of the changes were simple swaps for a lower sodium version of the product. For example, peanut butter with added



“Chronic disease rates are higher among people with limited access to resources. Working with food pantries created the opportunity to help improve the quality of patrons’ lives. Well-nourished children learn better, well-nourished adults work better, and well-nourished seniors stay healthier longer.”

—Holly Richards,
Cardiovascular Health
Coordinator, Office of Disease
Control and Prevention

salt and sugar was replaced by a single-ingredient peanut butter, containing only peanuts. Other staple food items were replaced with similar items that were lower in sodium, such as a chicken and rice soup for tomato soup. Beef stew, a staple that serves as a protein source, was replaced with fish sticks.

These simple swaps resulted in an average sodium reduction of 53%, and the lower sodium staples are now in routine distribution statewide. Overall, accomplishments include:

- 8 of 15 core food items that are purchased by GSFb and distributed to local food pantries are now lower in sodium.
- Sodium reduction efforts have reached 5,318 low-income Mainers in the targeted Cumberland and Penobscot counties, with up to 160,000 reached through the GSFb statewide network of partners and pantries.
- 1,614 people were reached through communications and outreach efforts.
- 18 food pantries participated in the GO, SLOW, WHOA toolkit pilot program offering education, food labeling, and signage on how patrons can reduce sodium and select lower sodium food items.

The Cumberland and Penobscot County Sodium Coordinators worked closely with GSFb to develop the GO, SLOW, WHOA toolkit. The toolkit encourages patrons to select healthy food options at local food pantries, with a traffic light labeling system (green, yellow, and red) based on Feeding America’s Foods to Encourage (F2E) guidelines. Both the food bank and associated pantries use posters, tips for canned foods, and labels that teach people which foods can be eaten any time and which should be eaten in moderation or only on rare occasions.

Conclusions: Offering lower sodium products gives Maine’s low-income families access to healthier foods in food pantries statewide. After the plan to offer lower sodium foods was put into action in food pantries to which GSFb distributes in Cumberland and Penobscot counties, 25 stakeholders from federal, state, and local partnering agencies shared their thoughts about lessons learned in the food bank and food pantry venues, as well as on the best way to sustain the work.

Stakeholders noted the importance of having a nutrition policy in place to guide the purchase of the healthier options. The food product changes were well supported by the GSFb administration and staff because the approach aligned with the organization’s existing mission, policies, and use of F2E criteria. GSFb continues to offer eight lower sodium core products and will look for ways to continue to reduce sodium in other core products. Although the increased availability of healthier, lower sodium products purchased and distributed by GSFb has a large statewide effect, addressing healthy donations at the food bank and food pantries is an important goal going forward.

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GSFB will also continue to work with local food pantries to use the GO, SLOW, WHOA toolkit. The complementary outreach and education help sustain success with food pantry partners, who report that using the GO, SLOW, WHOA approach is a great way to promote better choices to their clients.

Overall, the Maine Sodium Reduction in Communities Program (SRCP) addressed health equity by increasing the availability of healthy foods to people with limited access. SRCP made and sustained many changes by working collaboratively with GSFB on foods to target sodium reduction and leveraging purchasing power and relationships with manufacturers.



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References

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