

Public Health Practice Stories from the Field



Schenectady County Program Lowers Sodium in Menu Items for Seniors

Meal-makeovers Aim to Reduce High Blood Pressure, Risk for Heart Disease and Stroke

109,000

meals served at senior centers and through the home-delivered meals program each year

60%

of seniors have elevated blood pressure, to which excessive sodium can contribute

47%

of all meals were modified to lower sodium content

10%

sodium reduction across the five-week rotating menu

Schenectady County Public Health Services, in collaboration with Cornell Cooperative Extension, is working to reduce sodium content in home-delivered meals and meals served at congregate meal sites.

In Schenectady County, New York, the majority of senior home-delivered and congregate meals (i.e., meals served at senior centers and through the home-delivered meals program) are prepared by staff at the Schenectady County-owned Glendale Nursing Home. Nearly 109,000 meals are prepared per year that are received by 190 home-delivered meal recipients, approximately 120 senior congregate meal participants, and 200 residents of the county nursing home.

A baseline nutritional analysis of all meals (i.e., lunches and dinners) served through the home-delivered and senior congregate meals program revealed the following information:

- Average sodium per meal = 1,270 mg
- Average daily sodium (2 meals) = 2,540 mg

The county's goal is to reduce the sodium content of meals served through their home-delivered and senior congregate meals program by 30% over 3 years.

Excessive sodium can lead to high blood pressure, which is a leading risk factor for heart disease and stroke. As many as 60% of seniors over 65 have elevated blood pressure.

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What We Did

To reduce sodium, the dietitians and food preparation staff modified recipes, substituted low-sodium products when possible, and adopted new cooking techniques.

Recipe Modifications

- Removed bacon bits
- Decreased or removed cheese
- Eliminated added salt
- Created homemade BBQ sauce

Cooking Techniques

- Rinsed canned beans and tuna
- Eliminated salt in cooking water

Product Substitutions

- Added a sodium-free soup base to soups at 1 part sodium-free soup base for every 3 parts regular soup base
- Replaced canned mushrooms with fresh
- Used no salt added diced tomatoes
- Used reduced sodium ham and hot dogs
- Used lower sodium American cheese and tomato sauce

What We Accomplished

At the end of the program's first year, a nutritional analysis provided the following results:

- Average sodium per meal = 1,146 mg
- Average daily sodium (2 meals) = 2,292 mg
- Number of meals impacted = 49 out of 105 (46.6%)
- Reduction in sodium across the entire menu = 9.75%

Home-delivered meal participants completed a satisfaction survey. Participants were not notified that the meals were now lower in sodium. Lowering the sodium did not seem to affect the survey results negatively as a vast majority of the participants rated these meals as "flavorful."

What We Learned

One of the lessons learned is the need for food manufacturers to create larger sizes of low sodium products for food service operators. For example, low sodium soup bases are only available in a 1 lb. size versus the 5 or 8 lb. sizes commonly used by food service operators. This makes the switch to lower sodium products challenging because product cost often increases when items can't be purchased in bulk.

In addition, there is limited nutritional information for food used for commercial preparation since those products are not required to be labeled. Often times, nutritional information must be obtained through a commercial product database, which can be accessed through a food distributor, or may be purchased. The Schenectady Sodium Reduction in Communities project was given access to the local distributor's product database.

Identifying and using lower sodium products, decreasing the amount of processed foods used, and modifying recipes will continue in years 2 and 3 of the program in order to reach the goal of an overall 30% reduction in sodium.

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For information about this story, contact

Schenectady County Public Health Services
Glynnis S. Hunt, MS
Sodium Reduction in Communities Project Director
Telephone: 518-386-2810 ext. 2
E-mail: glynnis.hunt@schenectadycounty.com

For information about this publication, contact

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road NE, Atlanta, GA 30333
OSTLTS Toll-free Helpdesk: 866-835-1861
E-mail: OSTLTSfeedback@cdc.gov
Web: www.cdc.gov/stltpublichealth