Improving Access to Healthy Foods and Beverages in Recreational Facilities

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Issue:

While biology and genetics can increase an individual’s risk of obesity, it is widely recognized that the childhood obesity epidemic is primarily driven by unhealthy environments that promote consumption of energy-rich, nutrient-poor foods, and that discourage physical activity [1]. Healthy food environments, by contrast, encourage good dietary behaviours [2-5] and appropriate body weights among children [3, 4]. Overweight and obesity are a concern because body weight and lifestyle behaviours track from childhood to adulthood, increasing the risk for obesity and other chronic diseases later in life [6-8]. In an attempt to improve children’s food environments, the Alberta government released the Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth (ANGCY) in 2008. These voluntary guidelines are intended to facilitate children’s access to healthy food/beverage choices within schools, childcare, and recreational facilities [9].

While there is significant momentum in Alberta to use the ANGCY to improve school food environments, little attention has been paid to increasing access to healthy options within recreational facilities. Although the mandate of recreational facilities is to enhance well-being, many offer foods inconsistent with recommendations for healthy eating [10-14]. The presence of unhealthy foods within recreational facilities, and seeing adults consume them may undermine the health messages children receive in this setting. Furthermore, the fact that unhealthy foods are present in environments perceived to be healthy may influence perceptions of their healthfulness, leading to increased purchase and consumption [15].

Recreation facilities have been identified as an important setting in which to enact policies and practices in support of healthy dietary behaviours [16-18]. According to a recent Alberta survey, 80% of decision-makers in government, schools, workplaces, and the media support restricting availability of sugar-sweetened drinks and other unhealthy foods within vending machines in public buildings [19]. Similarly in Ontario, staff and customers were interested in and receptive to healthier food options in recreational facilities [20]. Canadian provinces, including Alberta, have initiated action to encourage and support recreational facilities to voluntarily adopt the sale of healthier foods through developing nutrition guidelines [9, 21], incentive-based programs [22], toolkits [22-25] and other printed and online resources. Evidence suggests, however, that voluntary standards have failed to support meaningful change to recreational facility food environments [12-14]. In Alberta, one year following the release of the ANGCY, only one-half of recreational facility managers were aware of the ANGCY and few had implemented (6%) them [13]. Financial constraints appear to be the most important barrier to offering healthier items in Alberta’s recreational facilities, as facility [14] and food service managers [26] perceive that selling healthier foods is unprofitable and might jeopardize sponsorship agreements.

Benefits to Taking Action:

It is ironic that the very places where children go to be active may be perpetuating the problem of obesity by providing little to no access to healthy food options. Increased access to healthy options will improve children’s diets and contribute to obesity reduction and prevention. Given the large number of children and youth served by recreational facilities, implementation of the ANGCY can have a significant impact at a population level.

Authors: Dana Olstad
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In general, voluntary guidelines have proven relatively ineffective in encouraging provision of healthier items by the food industry [27]. Mandated policy, by contrast, is virtually certain to increase the availability of healthier foods, provided that policies are enforced. Policy is also the most effective and equitable strategy for addressing the unhealthy nature of recreational facility food environments because they apply equitably to all children, are relatively low cost, sustainable and effectively reshape the environment with little effort on the part of the individual [28-31].

**Considerations:**

Findings from a recent multiple case study suggest that managers are gatekeepers of the food environment in recreational facilities, and thus efforts to implement nutrition guidelines must target managers’ knowledge, beliefs and perceptions of nutrition guidelines [14]. Managers, however, cannot implement nutrition guidelines alone, as the study showed that intersectoral linkages with schools and formal health promoting partnerships with industry were essential to support implementation of nutrition guidelines [14]. Efforts to improve the food environment in recreational facilities will therefore require collaborative action across multiple sectors.

Although managers perceive that healthy foods do not sell in recreational settings [26, 32], evidence suggests this perception is not accurate. A recent study showed that the sale of healthy items in recreational facilities closely mirrors their availability (results submitted for publication). Furthermore, revenues and profits did not decrease when the availability of healthy items was increased. It will be important to share these positive findings with managers, to ensure they are aware of which healthy items patrons prefer, and to provide training regarding strategies they can use to support the sale of healthier options.

**APCCP Priorities for Action:**

- Advocate for mandated, resourced and monitored implementation of the Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth in recreational facilities.

**What’s Next:**

- Researchers at the University of Alberta (Dana Olstad, Dr. Kim Raine and Dr. Linda McCargar) continue to investigate strategies to increase sales of healthier items in recreational facilities. Study findings will contribute practical information regarding strategies to implement the ANGCY in a financially sustainable manner. Researchers are developing fact sheets summarizing their research findings for distribution within the recreation sector.
- The APCCP will support those developing a communications plan to generate awareness of this research within Alberta’s recreation sector. The APCCP will develop an advocacy plan targeting Alberta public health officials, the Government Caucus, the Provincial Cabinet and Opposition Parties to require an expanded implementation of the ANGCY in Alberta’s recreational facilities.
- The APCCP will continue to review the status of this issue to assess and determine the need for future advocacy efforts.

**References:**


17. White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity, *Solving the problem of childhood obesity within a generation,* 2010, Executive Office of the President of the United States: Washington, D.C.


21. BC Recreation and Parks Association, *Stay Active, Eat Healthy program.* Available at: [http://stayactiveeathardy.ca/](http://stayactiveeathardy.ca/).


