The role of food in health care

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They say food and [health](https://www.smartbrief.com/originals/food-travel/health-and-wellness)go hand-in-hand, so it makes sense that the food offerings in the [health care industry](https://www.smartbrief.com/industry/health-care) would receive especially tough scrutiny from consumers. It’s not enough to simply have dishes that are nutritious – consumers increasingly expect healthy foods to taste good, too. As chefs throughout the industry continue to innovate in health-related areas such as [plant-based](https://www.smartbrief.com/search/site/plant-based) eating and [functional foods](https://www.smartbrief.com/search/site/functional%2520foods), those trends are making their way into health care institutions as well, leading to a wave of fresh, on-trend offerings at hospitals, senior living and long-term care facilities.

With the ongoing[COVID-19](https://www.smartbrief.com/search/site/covid-19) pandemic, the health care industry is also seeing significant impacts: some operators are dealing with limited capacity as patient counts rise, while others are struggling with reduced occupancy rates as they eliminate elective surgeries. But as we note in [Datassential](http://www.datassential.com/)’s COVID-19 Report 6: Healthcare Operators, while health care providers are certainly feeling the impact of the pandemic, only 6% of health care operators have closed completely for the time being, compared to 30% of operators overall. During this time of need, it’s only becoming more crucial to consider not just patients’ wants in terms of [food and beverage](https://www.smartbrief.com/industry/food-travel/food-beverage) offerings, but also re-assess what health care operators need from suppliers in order to weather this storm.

**Empower your patients**

While a health care facility might not be the first place that comes to mind when thinking about dining out, food does factor into consumers’ decision-making: over 40% of patients or residents say they at least somewhat considered the food options before deciding where to get care, according to Datassential’s 2020Healthcare Keynote Report.

And once a patient is actually admitted, food becomes an even more important aspect, as two-thirds of patients say food is important to their overall experience at a health care facility. The vast majority of health care patients or residents (over 80%) report having all of their meals on-site during their stay, so offering a variety of foods can be a way to alleviate patients’ boredom with the same options day in and day out.

Given the fact that many patients and/or visitors at a hospital might be feeling anxiety or hopelessness over their situation, empowering them to feel in control of things, even just in terms of what they choose to eat, can make a difference. This extends to patients or residents who may have to follow specific dietary guidelines during their stay – allowing for flexibility and offering rotating menus with multiple choices per daypart or menu category can be a way to permit some degree of personalization.

Even after patients are discharged, health care providers can still play a role in making sure they have convenient access to food: 69% of operators who offer boxes of food for patients to take home after being discharged say such initiatives have proven to be successful, and 36% of consumers are interested in those initiatives, too. While just 8% of health care operators offer post-discharge meals currently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, demand for take-home meals could increase, as leaving the house to get food can be risky for vulnerable populations.

**Taste remains key**

It’s important to note that most health care operators aren’t just making food for their patients. Employees and visitors also are part of overall customer traffic. Even when dining at a health care facility, customers place a premium on taste. According to our 2020 Healthcare Keynote Report, when given the choice between having tasty or nutritious food at a health care facility, 47% of survey respondents said they’d rather have food that tastes good, while only 11% said they’d rather have nutritious food. At the same time, healthier food options garner the most consumer interest (over 60%), highlighting health care operators’ ongoing struggle to provide foods that are healthy while still delivering on taste or indulgence.

Overall perceptions of health care food offerings are positive, though, with over 85% of consumers saying they were at least somewhat satisfied with the food offerings when they last dined at a health care facility.

In general, health care consumers’ preferences tend to align with those of the general population, meaning well-loved foods like pizza, ice cream and garlic bread have high appeal. At the same time, according to the report, consumers who dine at hospitals are also more likely to love a wide range of items compared to the general population. Lesser-known concepts such as bubble tea, cashew cheese and soy protein, for example, tend to be more well-liked by hospital visitors than the general population. This means that while menuing classic dishes like pizza or burgers can be a safe option (and provide comfort and a source of familiarity during the COVID-19 pandemic), there’s also opportunity to experiment with more niche, trend-forward ingredients.

**Operator needs are shifting**

While operators may have a desire to improve menu offerings, they may need suppliers’ help doing so.

For instance, although consumers may be seeking healthy versions of more indulgent foods, nearly a quarter of operators say they want help with that category, and a third rate it as one of their top challenges. Many health care operators say they tend to change up the menu offerings more often for employees or visitors compared to patient/resident menus, which can lead to more complex operations, more product purchasing considerations and increased prep concerns (some operators are starting to use separate kitchens).

In the short-term, with the COVID-19 pandemic, the health care segment may require supplier assistance with shifting to more grab-and-go or retail offerings to reduce contamination risks, as well as finding creative ways to not just feed employees but boost overall morale. Communication with suppliers on product availability will be key, not just right now but in the long-term, too.

While things today are turbulent, according to Datassential’s COVID-19 Report 6: Healthcare Operators, 45% of health care operators remain cautiously optimistic about the current situation and believe the industry will come out of it stronger than ever, indicating positive outlooks for the segment in the future.

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