

Abstract citation ID: ckad160.008
Healthiness and sustainability of food service in healthcare settings in Germany

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Background:

Current dietary patterns threaten individual and planetary health. Healthcare settings can set a positive example for dietary change, but data on the quality of food they offer is scarce. The aim of our study was to assess the environmental footprint and nutritional quality of food service in hospitals and nursing homes in Germany.

Methods:

We collected 6-12 months of food procurement data and all available meal plans from three nursing homes and two hospitals in Germany. Procured food items were categorized into 50 food groups (e.g., potatoes, beef, apples), and the environmental footprint was calculated (i.e., land use, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, acidification, eutrophication, and water use) using life-cycle analysis factors based on a recent meta-analysis. Lunches from a representative week were broken down into their constituent ingredients and analyzed

for adherence to the Planetary Health Diet (PHD) using an established dietary index (PHDI).

Results:

Preliminary analysis of one nursing home and one hospital showed that animal-source foods (ASF) accounted for 70% of overall GHG emissions and land use and 76% of water use, primarily from beef, pork, milk, and cheese. Among plant-based foods, coffee disproportionately contributed to the environmental footprint. Red meat accounted for 30-45% of lunch calories consumed (13-25% of weight) and potatoes accounted for 20-24% of calories (31-35% of weight), whereas vegetables and legumes combined accounted for 11-15% of calories (33-35% of weight). Nursing home meals achieved 61 and hospital meals 71 out of 150 points on the PHDI.

Conclusions:

Healthcare institutions in Germany have poor adherence to the PHD, with up to two-thirds of calories derived from red meat and potatoes. Unsurprisingly, ASF account for the majority of the institutions' environmental food footprint. Policies to make healthcare foodservice more environmentally sustainable while ensuring nutritional adequacy are urgently needed.

Key messages:

- Foodservice in German hospitals and nursing homes is neither healthy nor environmentally sustainable.
- Policies are needed to improve healthcare food service for individual and planetary health.