

From the Health Officer
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Making Workplace Vending Machines Healthy

If you are an employer who cares about the health of your workers, you may want to take a critical look at the items for sale in the vending machines at your workplace.

Vending machines are a fact of life in break rooms everywhere, from factories to offices to schools to medical clinics. While they provide a convenient pick-me-up for workers who must eat on the run, vending machines are often packed with items rich in fat, sugar and chemical additives.

This means that employees looking for a healthy snack or beverage have few, if any, nutritious options to choose from in most workplace vending machines. New laws take effect this month to limit the sale of unhealthy foods to public school pupils in California, but when it comes to adults at work, anything goes.

If you are an employer with one or more vending machines in your worksite, take a look today at what you are feeding your employees. Chances are your machines are loaded with sugary sodas, candy bars, fried potato chips, and other foods laden with trans fats, high fructose corn syrup and empty calories.

It doesn't have to be this way. You can adopt a healthy vending machine policy and do better for the health of your employees.

Healthy vending machines in the workplace are important for local public health because most working adults in El Dorado County are overweight, and some are frankly obese. For the first time since surveys began, the rate of overweight and obesity among the county's adults now exceeds the rate for California as a whole, according to a recent California Health Interview Survey.

Unhealthy diets are the leading cause of obesity in our workforce, and obesity is one of the main drivers for our county's rising incidence of chronic diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke and cancer.

Our inability to control these diseases is the single largest cause of escalating health care costs for local employers and workers.

We won't be able to reverse the obesity epidemic overnight, but providing healthy alternatives in workplace vending machines is one obvious place to start.

Healthier snacks made for vending machines are readily available to replace the unhealthy choices you are now providing. Such items include granola bars, trail mixes, dried fruit, pita chips, almonds, sunflower seeds, 100 percent fruit juices, and non-caloric drinks such as water, tea and diet sodas. You don't have to replace all the "junk food" in your machines, but you should provide a range of healthier alternatives.

Undoubtedly, some people will object to changes in vending machine menus. But such objection is usually short-lived, as most people soon get used to the new choices.

Cleaning out junk foods may even improve the bottom line. Vending industry research suggests that employers who make the effort to provide "better-for-you" snacks often find that they are strong sellers. For operators of vending machines, such items can be a valuable marketing tool, helping them tap into new markets of people looking for something healthier to eat at work.

Most employers want to keep their workers healthy and fit, reduce absenteeism and put a lid on exploding health care costs. It makes sense for worksite vending machines to send a consistent message.

If you have a question about this topic, you may contact Dr. Eberhart-Phillips at jeberhart-phillips@edcgov.us.