

# The importance of healthy eating to corporate wellness

Issued by [Association for Dietetics in South Africa](#)

15 Jul 2016

Employees eat nearly half of their daily meals and snacks at the workplace, which means that what is consumed during working hours can have a great impact on overall diet and health. It's not uncommon to find that many of us, who may well be healthy eaters at home, give way to speed and convenience when it comes to the food choices that are made, often under pressure, during working hours.

Corporate Wellness Week emphasised the need to put workplace nutrition in the spotlight. The calories we consume at work do count, as does the quality of the nutrients in the types of food we are choosing. While employers need to focus on the food that is being made readily available to employees, we also need to reflect on our choices and habits when it comes to eating on the job.



It is vital that companies focus on making healthy eating choices accessible and affordable. Canteen or cafeteria menus need to be in line with the SA Food-based Dietary Guidelines or developed together with a Registered Dietitian. Vending machines in the corporate environment should offer a majority of healthy eating options. Likewise, drinks and snacks made available at corporate meetings and events should be wholesome and healthy options. The benefits to businesses that care about healthy nutrition are far-reaching. There's a wide array of research studies that provide comprehensive evidence of the effects of what we eat on performance. Who doesn't want healthy, focused and productive employees?

There's also a lot that each of us can do to ensure that we are eating healthily during working hours.

Monique Piderit a Registered Dietitian and spokesperson for ADSA (Association for Dietetics in South Africa) works regularly in the corporate sector and has particular insights into the challenges of workplace nutrition and its important place in Corporate Wellness. She recommends:

- Be aware of everything that you are eating and drinking during working hours. Yes, you are under pressure but every calorie, and every nutrient still counts just the same.
- Take note of your eating habits at work, especially those triggered by workplace stress and pressure. If you find yourself routinely buying a packet of chips or a chocolate from the vending machine around the corner from your desk every time the going gets tough, it's time to change your habits and make better choices that will really help you to feel better. For example, replace a crunchy crisp craving for healthier nuts, popcorn or pretzels, and a sweet tooth with fresh fruit or dried fruit like cranberries.
- If your healthy eating choices are limited by what's available around you at or in close proximity to work, consider taking charge and preparing your own daily healthy lunchbox. It is actually not as much work as you may think, and it can be cost-saving too. When you get the balance of protein, carbohydrate, healthy fat and vitamins and minerals right in your lunchbox, you've aligned your workplace nutrition with your healthy lifestyle goals. When preparing dinner allow for a portion of food to be allocated for the next day. As you serve dinner, immediately set aside a portion of food into a container for lunch the next day.
- Make an effort to reduce your processed foods intake and go for the real thing. For instance, buy more lean chicken pieces than what you will eat for dinner, and then tuck a left-over drumstick in your lunchbox rather than spending extra on buying vienna's and other processed meats for your lunchbox.

- Declare an outright ban on sugary drinks in the workplace which are often all too easily available. Make water your first port of call. You can bring it to work infused with citrus, ginger or mint. Choose rooibos or herbal teas as your hot drinks at meetings or have cooled as a homemade iced tea in summer.
- Stock up on nutrient-dense, fresh fruit, veg and nuts that are so easy to snack right at your desk. Maybe you can stock the fridge at work, or also choose long-lasting fresh produce options like citrus or bananas that can stand on your desk all week long.
- Also keep easy options at hand like wholewheat/high fiber crackers, salt and sugar-free peanut butter and lean biltong. These foods can keep for weeks at a time. Making the healthy options the closest to hand so that when you are under pressure you will grab something that is really good for you.

As Monique points out: “We can’t talk about corporate wellness without talking about nutrition. A healthy employee is a focused and productive employee. What we eat is fundamental to our well-being in the short and long term. It is also fundamental to our performance in the moment. Work dominates the lives of adults and how we manage and choose our food at work is critical to our wellbeing.”

To find a Registered Dietitian in your area visit <http://www.adsa.org.za/Public/>.

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