

Healthy eating: Long Island hospitals provide food for life



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If you've recently been to a hospital facility on Long Island for a visit or procedure, your taste buds may have noticed a difference. That's because hospital dining options—once widely derided for being bland and banal—are improving, thanks to new collaborative efforts between local hospitals and food service providers.

"We follow the doctrine that 'food is medicine' and are committed to serving well-balanced meals that are both delicious and nutritious," says Shannon Cressy, food services director for the auxiliary services association at Stony Brook Southampton Hospital. "With more and more scientific evidence underscoring the positive impact of food on health, it just made good sense for us to focus on providing more and more healthy options."

Indeed, the hospital has embraced the mantra, now offering its own monthly virtual and in-person 'Food as Medicine' nutrition classes, taught by registered dietitians, that are free and open to patients and the community. The program encourages mindful eating habits to promote overall well-being, while emphasizing the benefits of seasonal and locally-sourced fruits and vegetables.

"[The] sessions focus on preventing and managing chronic illnesses by sharing expert nutrition guidance and practical, health-focused recipes," says Cressy. "Many discharged patients attend these classes to gain practical skills for maintaining a healthier lifestyle."

During stays, the dietary restrictions of hospital patients are carefully considered, and food options are customized according to their charts to fit their individual nutrition plans. Feedback is recorded and compiled for quality control and service improvements, ensuring patients are satisfied. "They can order meals from a menu which offer healthy choices," Ambika Chawla, associate vice president of system clinical nutrition services at Northwell Health, says of the patients. "We also give patients the opportunity to rate us by submitting real-time 'reviews' during their stay, allowing for immediate menu adjustments and personalized interactions."

Similarly, the Northwell hospital system has made concerted efforts to keep its menus updated and teeming with healthful choices. "We understand that mealtimes can be a source of comfort and enjoyment during a hospital stay, and we are committed to making each meal a bright spot in our patients' day," Chawla adds.

An overhaul of Northwell's dining options in 2017 led to the system's renewed focus on how food is sourced, prepared, and served to both patients and staff under the guidance of Chawla and acclaimed chef Bruno Tison. "This system-wide initiative prioritized fresh, locally sourced, non-GMO ingredients, prepared with the expertise of Michelin-starred chefs and culinary professionals from renowned restaurants," Chawla says.

The result is an extensive list of nutritious offerings that reflect modern palates in an environmentally-friendly way. "Cafeterias

offer themes like meatless Mondays to promote plant-forward diets and wellness Wednesdays to encourage a healthy lifestyle," says Chawla. "Our vending options include pre-made salads and healthy sandwiches, and we limit sales of sugary drinks. Additionally, our hospitals host regular farmers markets and CSAs [community-supported agriculture] in partnership with local farms to provide easy access to fresh produce."

The shift in food preferences among hospital patients, visitors and staff has not gone unnoticed by food service providers, who have tinkered with their menus for years to meet the changing demands of customers, including a renewed focus on sustainability. "We work with our vendors to source high-quality ingredients all year round," says Kevin Lessing, executive vice president of food service management at Lessing's Hospitality Group in Great River. "Our menus prioritize seasonal produce so that we can source items locally as much as possible. The warmer seasons, such as now, are a delight as our local options become abundant."

While the group has provided for other clients in institutional settings like schools, Lessing says that hospitals require a different approach, leaving more room to experiment. "Traditional fare in schools is focused on 'kid and teen-friendly' foods, which we always work hard to produce in a nourishing, wholesome manner," he says. "Medical professionals have greater familiarity and appreciation for items such as whole grains, legumes, herbs, leafy greens

and bold seasonings. This gives us a larger breadth of recipes and flavor profiles to work with."

An overview of the items Lessing's provides to hospitals showcases a broad variety of grains, proteins and flavors that customers may not have previously associated with food in a hospital setting, all tailored to minimize ecological impact and fit modern dietary needs. Healthy salad bowls, lettuce wraps and a smoothie bar are just a few of the options made available at hospitals thanks to the company, which has continued to adapt to evolving tastes.

"We offer customizable grains bowls comprised of a protein selection of chicken, shrimp or tofu, rotating grain options such as quinoa, wheat berries, bulgar wheat and farro, and seasonal roasted and raw produce such as squashes, brussels sprouts, beets, sweet potatoes, apples and pears in the fall and winter," Lessing says. "Then in spring and summer, the focus shifts to local produce including asparagus, summer squashes, cucumbers, tomatoes and berries."

The group has developed their new menus not only to be popular, but to remain sustainable as well, for both the hospitals and the company itself. "Our highly skilled team of food service managers and chefs work closely with our company nutritionist to ensure that our menu offerings are well rounded and nutritious while meeting the budget needs of our clients and customers," explains Lessing. "Mindful purchasing, production and overall efficient operations allow us to provide high-quality meals at a reasonable price."