

# Healthy food at your fingertips

## Vending machines can offer good choices

When supporting worker efforts to control their weight and live a healthy lifestyle, companies often have to look no farther than their vending machines.

Are they stocked with chips, sugary soda, and candy? Or are healthier options available, such as flavored water, skim milk, multigrain snacks, fruit slices, nuts, and seeds?

### What's a healthy snack?

When the Chicago Park District revamped its vending machines to include healthy snacks, it used these criteria:

- No more than 250 calories per serving
- No more than 42 grams of added sweetener per 20 ounces of serving
- No more than 35 percent of calories from fat (with the exception of seeds and nuts)
- No more than 10 percent of calories from saturated fat
- No trans fats
- No more than 35 percent total weight from sugar and caloric sweeteners (natural fruit juice allowed)
- No more than 400 milligrams of sodium per serving
- At least 5 items must contain less than 250 mg of sodium per serving
- No more than 2 servings per package.

This concern was faced by the Chicago Park District, the largest municipal park system in the nation. It offered a multitude of physical activity options for the community, but the options in its vending machines didn't seem to match its focus on healthy living.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) described the department's approach in "Food Service Guidelines: Case Studies from States and Communities." When its contract with a vending machine company expired, the department switched its focus to filling its machines with healthier options.

The department's new contract called for machines to be stocked with items that met its standards for sodium, sugar, fat, and calorie limits.

It was initially a challenge to get the vending machines stocked with the healthier items, however. Vending service drivers, who were responsible for filling the machines, did not understand the guidelines and were placing noncompliant items in them.

Training sessions helped resolve the issue, but some problems lingered. To address this, a kit containing only healthy snacks was developed. Drivers stocked the vending machines only with food from the kit, rather than with snacks they selected.

Taste tests introduced the new snacks to staff members and the public. In addition, a uniform pricing strategy was established.



Evaluations showed positive attitudes toward the healthier vending options from both staff and park patrons, and a sales volume that exceeded expectations. Having only healthy snacks in a vending machine may seem strict, but the department found the healthier snacks to be both profitable and an effective way to offer more nutritious options.



Employers can learn from the department's experience and work with vendors to make healthy selections the norm in company vending machines. This can make it easier for employees to live a healthy lifestyle and reduce the number of empty calories they add to their day.