

Los Angeles County's "Eat Your Best" Initiative Brings Healthy Food Options to Universities

One in four adult Los Angeles County and San Diego County residents has been diagnosed with [hypertension](#), also known as high blood pressure,¹ which can be caused or worsened by consuming foods high in sodium.

The [Los Angeles County Department of Public Health \(DPH\)](#) recognized the importance of responding to the high prevalence of hypertension and cardiovascular diseases in Southern California and, along with [San Diego County's Health and Human Services Agency \(COSD-HHSA\)](#), partnered with Southern California universities to launch the "Eat Your Best. Less Salt. More Plants" (EYB) Initiative. This initiative aimed to reduce the risk of hypertension among people who eat at universities by improving access to and increasing the visual appeal of lower sodium foods.



Key components of the EYB Initiative included delivering culinary trainings and creating toolkits to help university food service staff offer lower sodium plant-based and plant-forward foods (i.e., the inclusion of plant foods in place of animal protein). EYB promotional materials were also developed to encourage university students, faculty, and visitors to try these healthier options.

Public Health Challenge

Many foods high in sodium, such as burgers, pizza, and chips, are popular among people who eat at universities. Foods that are lower in sodium are less popular. University cafeterias and snack shops often sell foods that contain excess sodium, such as prepackaged and processed foods; lower sodium alternatives are hard to find in these settings. Together, this may lead university students, staff, and visitors to consume more sodium, increasing their risk for poor health outcomes.

Approach

DPH and COSD-HHSA partnered with [CIA \(Culinary Institute of America\) Consulting](#) to work with university food service staff at four Southern California universities. As part of the EYB Initiative, a cookbook of flavorful and visually appealing plant-forward recipes was developed and distributed to university partners. These recipes replaced animal proteins, such as meat and dairy, with fresh vegetables, fruits, whole grains, nuts, seeds, and beans and other legumes.

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62%
of food in a newly opened salad bar was low sodium and plant-based

Use of salad bar toolkit led to
167%
increase in number of fresh vegetable offerings

And
35%
decrease in high sodium processed offerings

“Partnering with Public Health on the ‘Eat Your Best’ Initiative helped us reduce the sodium content of some of the foods sold or served on the California State University, Northridge, campus and improved our ability to promote the consumption of healthier foods to our large and diverse population of students, faculty, and staff.”

— **Annette Besnlian**, EdD, MPH
Executive Director of the Marilyn Magaram Center at
California State University, Northridge

This collaboration also resulted in developing a salad bar toolkit, which outlined culinary techniques that increase plant-forward, lower sodium, and visually appealing salad bar options. Similarly, a protein flip toolkit was developed to guide food service staff on how to increase or substitute plant proteins in popular menu items. DPH and COSD-HHSA also created Eat Your Best promotional materials, including posters, signs, T-shirts, tote bags, pens, and notepads, that showcased colorful fruits and vegetables and simple messaging that encouraged consumers to eat less salt.

Results

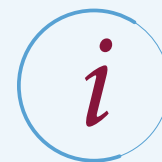
Through this collaboration, all four universities replaced high sodium processed ingredients and menu options with lower sodium alternatives. Two universities used the salad bar toolkit to modernize a new salad bar. At one university, use of this toolkit led to a 167% increase in the number of fresh vegetables as salad bar offerings and a 35% decrease in high sodium processed offerings. In the other, a new salad bar was placed in a centrally located part of the campus; nearly 62% of the food in this salad bar was low sodium and plant-based items.

What’s Next

With the success of the EYB Initiative at these four universities, DPH and COSD-HHSA are planning to work with food service staff at other universities through in-person and virtual trainings.

The initiative will add to its toolkits and recipes, creating plant-forward and plant-based “grab-and-go” recipes for partners interested in sodium reduction. All resources will be housed on the [EYB website](#) to facilitate communication about and engagement of sodium reduction efforts at universities and other food settings.

DPH and COSD-HHSA plan to provide technical assistance tools with leadership at these universities to support their ongoing efforts to establish healthy food and nutrition policies with evidence-based nutrition standards, procurement practices, and evaluation tools.



Find Out More

Learn more about [Choose Health LA | Salt](#).

Use the [SRCP Implementation Guide](#) to apply sodium reduction strategies derived from the SRCP into your communities.

References

¹ UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. [California Health Interview Survey](#). Accessed August 9, 2021.