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# Nurses Have to “Run the Gauntlet”: Achieving Healthy Eating While Working in Hospitals

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# The Need for Healthy Nurses

- Largest healthcare professional group
  - Majority overweight/obese
  - Not meeting dietary recommendations for health
    - Standard American Diet is **#1 risk** for leading causes of death/disability in United States
- 62% work in hospitals
  - Shift work
  - Unique health/safety risks

(United States Department of Labor: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015)

(American Nurses Association, 2017)

(Murray et al., 2013)



# Purpose

Explore:

- Nurses' dietary behaviors in the workplace
- Nurses' perceptions of influences related to shift work and the hospital setting on making healthy nutritional choices
- Nurses' recommendations for achieving healthy eating at work



# Research Methods

- Qualitative descriptive with thematic analysis
- Theoretical Domains Framework:
- IRB approved
- Sampling
- Data Collection
- Analysis

Knowledge	Skills
Behavioral regulation	Social/professional role & identity
Reinforcement	Optimism
Beliefs about consequences	Beliefs about capabilities
Intentions	Goals
Memory, attention, & decision processes	Environmental context & resources
Social influences	Emotion

(Atkins et al., 2017)



# Results

## Personal Characteristics:

- Age 24-62, median 38.5
- 86% female
- 90% white
- 67% overweight/obese
- 1-32 years nursing experience, median 7

## Nursing Characteristics:

- 43% work day shift & weekends
- 24% work night shift & weekends
- 52% from large hospitals
- Many specialties represented



# Results

## Predominant TDF domains

- Environmental context and resources
- Social/professional role and identity
- Memory, attention, and decision processes
- Social influences
- Emotion
- Behavioral Regulation



# Themes

- Nursing role and responsibilities restrict freedom of movement and minimize individual control over dietary practices
- The Hospital Food Environment is oppressively unhealthy
- Free food is currency and influences consumption
- Shift work is a major barrier to healthy eating



# Nursing role and responsibilities restrict freedom of movement and minimize individual control over dietary practices

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“If you’re a nurse, you don’t stop until your patients are done and they don’t need you. And that’s when you take care of yourself. You’re holding your bladder and you’re eating junk food instead of the salad you made for yourself, because its quicker and you can get back to your patients.”  
(Todd, Emergency Department)



# The Hospital Food Environment is oppressively unhealthy

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“It’s kind of odd how many unhealthy options there are, even in the hospital cafeteria, just like those giant pastries and stuff like that ... even if you’re a family member there, or working there, or, no matter why you are in the hospital, you are probably under some kind of stress, and you don’t always make the best decisions when you are like that.”

(Ann, Intensive Care Unit)



# Free food is currency and influences consumption

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“If I am at work and it’s busy, it’s always busy, and there’s a free donut in front of you, you don’t know necessarily when, how long it’s going to be until you take your lunch break, you don’t necessarily know if you’re going to get a lunch break, everyday things happen, so you just grab what’s in front of you, it’s almost like a survival instinct, I don’t think about if these calories are worth it, I don’t think about if they are good or if they are going to help me, I just eat what I see in front of me” (Jeffrey, Med/Surg)



# Shift work is a major barrier to healthy eating

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“I could pack a lunch, but because I work 12 hours, I am tired, so the thought of going to the grocery and then fixing it, and then bringing it... so I just gave up”

(Suzie, PACU)



# Recommendations

## Change the workplace food environment

- Make healthy eating the **easy** choice
- Improve availability of fresh/healthy foods
  - available 24/7
  - near/on nursing units
- Offer healthy foods that are easy to eat on the go
- Subsidize cost of healthy foods



# Recommendations

## Leadership support

- Model healthy dietary behaviors
- Make nurses' health a priority
  - Focus on diet
- Encourage staff to take breaks
  - Ensure coverage
  - Protect from interruptions
- Stop using junk food as currency
- Offer healthy foods



# Recommendations

## Workplace wellness programs should target healthy eating

- Focus on health, not weight loss
- Offer programs based on shift workers' schedules
- Congruent messaging
- Incentives
- Subsidize costs of healthy options
- Employer provided meal plans



# Recommendations

## Education

- Nurses need more education on:
  - Role of proper nutrition in health promotion/disease prevention
  - Importance of self-care
  - Strategies to include more healthy foods in the diet
  - Food prep and recipes



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