

Food for Thought: Optimising the Hospital Dining Experience for Visitors and Staff



Spending time in hospital is an intense experience for everyone. Regardless of the reason for being there, stress levels can be high and staying relaxed and well-fed can be hard.

Hospital dining is an opportunity for hospitals to make the most of those everyday moments for a positive impact on health and wellbeing. Creating a positive dining experience for visitors and staff is important. It is a way that hospitals can provide comfort and respite at a time when people need it most. With well over 110,000 hospital beds across the middle east, the challenge of keeping all patients, doctors, support staff and visitors fed and comfortable is not a small one.

Home Away from Home

Hospital staff are often on shift for long hours. With so much time spent on-site, it's essential to create an atmosphere that makes staff feel appreciated. They deserve good options when it comes to mealtimes and breaks, as well as a comfortable space in which to rest and refresh weary minds and bodies. Some studies indicate that up to 70% of staff choose not to eat the food on offer in their hospitals during their breaks. Whatever the reasons for this, it should not be because of the quality of food on offer.

Many visitors will also be under intense stress and so focused on the needs of their loved ones that they neglect their own health and wellbeing. Equally, for some patients, the café and dining options on-site can be an escape from the confines of their room.

Time spent in hospital is exhausting, with many decisions to be made, often under extreme pressure. If everything in the dining experience is thought through correctly, people can have the chance to emotionally and physically relax.



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Source: unison.org 2019*

The Importance of Food and Drink

Above all else, offering a good range of quality food and drinks will make all the difference to people's experience. Hospital dining is traditionally associated with quick, easy food and cheap vending-machine coffee. This type of disposable culture was designed to quench hunger and thirst quickly and cheaply, but things have moved on and fast food doesn't need to be synonymous with unappealing and unhealthy food any longer.

Instead, hospitals can cater for people wanting quick, easy solutions by:

- Offering a range of hot and cold, lighter or more filling options using high-quality ingredients.
- Employing trained chefs to ensure the food is nutrient-rich, varied, and aesthetically pleasing.
- Have options that cater to the regional and cultural tastes of the hospital's staff and visitor profile.
- Offer well-priced alternatives to junk food like granola yoghurt pots, fresh fruit and cereal bars.
- Having a range of payment and ordering options in recognition that people's comfort levels with being in public spaces may have changed with the recent pandemic.

When it comes to beverages, offer zero-calorie alternatives and fruit or vegetable smoothies for easy, appealing goodness alongside the fizzy drinks for those that want them. The Sodexo **natural!** concept offers a full range of delicious fruit blends and smoothies made to order in minutes. It can be rolled out in any space and is a great example of on-the-go nourishment with universal appeal.

Consider the Coffee



Many customers will feel drained and exhausted from spending long periods of time in the hospital. That's why good quality coffee should be an integral part of their experience and in a country like Qatar where the annual per capita consumption of coffee is around twice the global average at 2.2kg per person, one can see the importance of making good quality coffee a focal point. It's also an opportunity to make socially responsible choices and tap into customers' environmental conscience.

With the **'Vive Cafe'** concept brought to Qatar by Sodexo, instant coffee vending machines and throwaway plastic cups are swapped for barista-style coffee offering premium roasts, real mugs and a range of dairy-free milk alternatives.

How to Create a Comfortable Space

While food and drink are clearly key focal points, it's important to also look beyond the basics to deliver a cohesive dining experience. A relaxing ambience, calming décor and uncluttered open space with lots of natural light will reduce feelings of unease and anxiety. Comfortable chairs are also essential. Good-quality seating encourages visitors to relax and reduces the risk of health issues, such as back pain from sitting for a prolonged period.

Down to the Details

Free Wi-Fi with a strong connection means people can treat the hospital as a home away from home. Easily accessible outlets to recharge electronic devices help visitors to stay in touch with family and keep on top of work commitments without any stress whilst having a stay in hospital or whilst visiting loved ones. Visitors may also want to use their time in these spaces to disconnect from the world as much as possible. Providing small opportunities for escapism in the form of stress-relieving activities, such as travel magazines or adult colouring books goes a long way to achieving this. Hospitals can also provide for the needs of young families by providing reading and activity books and for children of all ages.

A Great Investment

Investing in good-quality food and drink to optimise the hospital dining experience pays off. Employees will return to work from breaks feeling more energized and ready to perform, and visitors will feel better equipped to deal with stress and turbulence in the hours and days ahead. A balanced diet and the opportunity to relax properly will improve the overall quality of people's hospital experience. Something that every hospital should strive for.



- Coffee Business Intelligence - Coffee Culture in Arab Countries: From Tradition to Innovation (2018) - <https://coffeebi.com/2018/07/02/coffee-culture-in-arab-countries-from-tradition-to-innovation/>
- Unison.org.uk - (2019) - <https://www.unison.org.uk/news/press-release/2019/04/hospital-staff-say-patient-meals-not-fit-eat/>