

Nudging food bank clients towards healthier food choices

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Introduction: Nudge strategies are environmental cues designed to influence individual behaviour and have been applied to encourage healthier food choices. They make products more visible, accessible and appealing and can involve varying levels of human and financial resource intensity.

Objective: To evaluate the effectiveness of low and high resource intensive nudge strategies to increase healthy food selection in an Ottawa food bank.

Methods: Staff offer foods to clients in a routine order in the food bank. During intervention, the offering order, appearance and/or appeal of three foods was altered using nudge strategies. Two low resource intensive methods (carrots and canned legumes) and one high resource intensive method (brown rice) were studied during a 2-week baseline and 2-week intervention period. Carrots were moved to an attractive display with a healthy choice sign. Canned legumes were offered twice, once early in the offer order and again in the usual place in the offer order. Brown rice was offered twice, once as part of a recipe bundle and again in its usual offer order. Data on the number of food bank visits, food items selected and qualitative burdens and challenges were collected.

Results: The proportion of visits where an item was selected increased significantly for canned legumes (27% to 36%) and brown rice recipe bundles (16% to 48%). No significant change was detected for carrots. Recipe bundles had financial and human resource costs but resources were minimal for both canned legumes and carrots.

Conclusions: Low and high resource intensive nudge strategies increase the selection of healthy foods in a food bank setting. The choice of which foods to nudge may be important.

Significance to the Field of Dietetics: These findings highlight opportunities for dietitians when designing interventions that focus on changing the environment to influence healthy food choices for a priority population.