Healthy food and beverages options continue to expand in all venues which has translated to consumers practicing healthier behaviors, too. Healthy beverage sales reached nearly 71%! Annually, the workgroup reviews the literature on non-nutritive sweeteners (NNS). At present, all NNS, like those found in diet sodas, are generally recognized as safe (GRAS) by the USDA. However, there is some evidence that certain sweeteners, such as aspartame, sucralose and saccharin may have a negative impact on health.

UW Health’s focus is to be stewards of the environment by contributing to the local food system in environmentally, economically and socially responsible ways.
Challenges and Opportunities

UW Health did extensive research and proactively addressed the challenges that removing SSBs would present, including a temporary decline in revenue.

UW Health was well-aware that changing consumer behavior would be challenging. UW Health posted a series of educational messaging to confirm that this was a strategic and informed decision, based on input from patients and families and employee surveys.

UW Health also posted helpful tips to help patients and employees to make behavior changes and how to wean self from soda. UW Health used several tactics to inform several audiences, including posting articles on external, internal websites and social media; created FAQs and comment cards; established a dedicated email inbox so as a way to provide feedback, ask questions and for clarification; wrapped vending machines; and offered taste testing of new products in vending machines.

As a healthcare system, UW Health is committed to modeling healthy food and beverage choices. UW Health serves more than 2.5 million meals annually and has the opportunity to positively impact the commercial market. UW Health focused on increasing its selection of healthy beverages and installed water filter stations.

Strategies for Success

UW Health learned three primary lessons from removing sugar-sweetened beverages.

1. Leadership commitment to change is critical

   Identify and collect important data that speaks the language of key administrators who are essential in moving an initiative forward. UW Health successfully used their Healthy Food and Beverage Process Assessment tool to gather baseline data and then monitored consumer behaviors through sales revenue.

2. Recognize your Champions

   Approaches to initiating changes to the food and beverage environment needs to be as multifaceted as the change itself. Enlist the champions that can advocate for change from all perspectives including clinicians, researchers and academia, business operations, marketing and consumers.

3. Prioritize education and communication

   Empower the “front line” culinary services staff with the knowledge as to why the decision to remove SSB was made and verbiage to respond to questions about the change. As the most accessible resource to consumers, these staff members will likely field the majority of feedback – positive and negative. Take important steps to frequently educate consumers and offer samples of the healthy products replacing SSBs.

   To assume there will be no consumer discord is short-sighted and may inflate the situation. At the start, and still today, we observe that most individuals express concerns about how this change will affect them, personally. Once their voice is heard and then they are invited to consider how this decision positively affects the health of a larger community of people, most come to accept why SSBs were removed.