WEIGHT LOSS SUPPORT FOR NURSES

APPS AND HEALTHY FOOD OPTIONS

Resources designed to support healthcare workers’ well-being that can help you lose weight and change how you think about food

By Jennifer Trueland
Long shifts, poor access to healthy food at work, and the constant temptation of chocolates and biscuits from patients and their families when you need a quick energy fix – is it any wonder that so many nurses struggle with their weight?

This is a serious issue for nurses in the UK and for health services as well.

**Obesity prevalence in nurses**

Research suggests that around one in four nurses would fall into the obese range using body mass index (BMI) calculations, with a BMI of 30 or over. Prevalence of obesity is higher among nurses than other healthcare professionals and people in non-health-related occupations, according to the study.

The same research points out that this increases their risk of musculoskeletal and mental health conditions, which are the main causes of sickness absence in health services.

According to the global health charity C3 Collaborating for Health, obesity among nurses is a growing concern, not only because of the effect it has on their health and well-being but also because of the impact on productivity and relationships with patients.

C3 founder and director Christine Hancock says: ‘After a long career in nursing, in which I always used to talk about preventing chronic disease, I was bowled over to realise you could prevent three quarters of heart disease, heart attacks, strokes, three quarters of diabetes, half of many cancers and almost all chronic respiratory illness if you just focused on three major risk factors, which are smoking, the lack of physical activity and what we eat.

‘It sounds so obvious and simple but it isn’t, otherwise we wouldn’t be, as a country, in the state we are.’

It is important to reach nurses, adds Ms Hancock, who is a former RCN general secretary and was president of the International Council of Nurses, because there are so many of them globally and they can have a huge influence on patients, as well as their own families. But they cannot do it alone.

‘Quite early on, one of the things we realised was that nurses need support in their own health, because then they can really be ambassadors for the world,’ Ms Hancock says.

**Limited food choices**

The charity’s Healthy Weight Initiative for Nurses programme was part of that support and its work is ongoing. Its Nursing You programme includes an app designed by and for nurses, to enable them to reflect on how they make decisions at work and to identify well-being goals, such as how to maintain a healthier weight or drink more water.

C3 associate in nursing Michaela Nuttall says that too often the environment in which nurses work makes it harder to achieve that.

The charity surveyed nurses and found that although many hospital canteens claimed to serve healthy food, their opening times were...
Employer support: maintaining the health and well-being of the workforce

As the UK’s largest health body, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has a staff of around 40,000 people – the population of a medium-sized town.

This includes almost 14,000 qualified nurses and midwives, and many struggle with their weight.

Occupational health nurse Rona Wall says: ‘It’s been well-documented that there’s a rising level of obesity among nursing staff nationally.’

Ms Wall, who has a background in acute medical nursing and is head of occupational health and safety at the health board, says: ‘Shift patterns don’t help, and eating on the go can become a habit. My role is to try to maintain the health and well-being of the workforce. We know that healthy living promotes good mental health, and positive staff have better outcomes for patients – and obviously for the staff member as well.’

The health board takes part in the Scotland-wide Healthy Working Lives programme, earning a gold award for its achievements.

Specific initiatives include a ‘Weigh in at Work’ self-help resource to encourage teams to help each other to make healthy choices, and a range of exercise classes and options to encourage physical activity.

Healthy eating options

‘We’ve also done lots of work over the years on healthy vending machines – making sure they contain water and healthy snacks,’ says Ms Wall.

‘The canteens all have healthy eating options – and when you take away the chips, people will make healthier choices.’

Nursing staff face particular challenges in their working environment – not least food gifts from well-meaning patients and their relatives.

‘If you have limited time and the canteen is a long way away, it can be easy to grab a chocolate or biscuit,’ she says. ‘We understand that. But we’re taking steps to make it easier for people to do the right thing for themselves and their patients.’

Restricted and nurses had to queue with patients, taking a long time out of a short break.

It also found that nurses who brought their own food to work had nowhere to store it, heat it or even to eat it.

‘We know from our survey that many nurses had to eat their food in a changing room or a clinical room – there’s no longer the space to go and eat your food,’ she says.

‘And that’s just nurses based in hospitals – district nurses are limited in the places they pass (to buy food) and if they bring a packed lunch it’s got to last all day in their car, so many will just grab what they can from a garage.’

Policymakers have recognised lack of healthy food options in the workplace as an issue, some NHS bosses. In 2018, then NHS England chief executive Simon Stevens called for the health service to practise what it preached and make trusts better food environments.

Unconscious persuasion

Tameside and Glossop Integrated Care NHS Foundation Trust chief executive Karen James, whose background is in nursing, took this seriously. The trust worked with Sandra Roycroft-Davis, a weight loss specialist and the founder of website ThinkingSlimmer.com, on a pilot scheme using its Slimpod system, an online weight-loss system involving nine-minute voice recordings and video coaching.

It uses a combination of unconscious persuasion, psychology, behavioural science and neurolinguistic programming to retrain the mind to change the way you think and feel about food and yourself.

The Slimpod system involves listening to nine-minute voice recordings.
Ms James says: ‘We had been approached by Sandra at Slimpod to consider a 12-week pilot scheme involving 100 nurses and other medical and support staff to see if her system would work in an NHS environment. We thought we had nothing to lose and everything to gain.’

Support for staff included online forums and one-to-one coaching but crucially, it also involved tackling the environment. The trust restaurant banned all sugary foods and drinks, limiting drinks to tea, coffee, milk and water.

‘Cakes, puddings and sugary snacks were taken off the menu, replaced by fresh fruit, and we even rethought our meals, substituting chips and pie with salads and low-carb, healthier options where possible,’ says Ms James.

‘All this was four years ago and we’ve stuck to our pledge – the restaurant still bans sugar from the menu.’

**Removing unhealthy snacking**

Many of the staff who took part in the pilot project have maintained a healthy weight and there are plans for another study involving a new intake of nurses, led by the trust’s chief nurse, Ms James.

This includes replacing food in vending machines with healthier options, and there are plans for a service that will deliver healthy food closer to where staff work.

She said 90% of the consultants, midwives, community nurses and medical support secretaries who took part in the project reported that their biggest problem at work was snacking.

‘By following the Slimpod programme, they said they had naturally reduced their portion sizes, chosen to eat healthier foods and lost weight.’

One person on the study lost nearly 13kg over the 12 weeks, and one who had diabetes was able to come off their medication, she says, adding that staff morale improved and efforts to encourage healthy eating continue.

Ms Roycroft-Davis says her dream at the beginning of the Slimpod programme was to work with the NHS, because she believed that was where she could make the biggest difference.

‘Staff are on a hiding to nothing where their health is concerned, particularly their eating habits, because of the environment in which they work. It’s incredibly difficult to maintain a healthy lifestyle if you work in a hospital.’

Since its success in Tameside, Slimpod has expanded to other NHS sites including the Royal Orthopaedic Hospital NHS Foundation Trust in Birmingham.

The system works, she says, because the behaviour change is generated from the subconscious rather than relying on willpower.

‘Trying to change your behaviour consciously is hard work, which is why so many people yo-yo diet,’ she says. ‘But this is a way of normalising your relationship with foods.’

Jennifer Trueland is a health journalist

**Further information**

C3 Collaborating for Health: Healthy Weight Initiative for Nurses

c3health.org/win

Public Health Scotland: Healthy Working Lives healthyworkinglives.scot


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**Podcast helped me ditch the diets and lose 13kg**

While critical care nurse Elaine Grainger (pictured) was looking forward to her daughter’s wedding, she had one concern. Carrying more weight than she would have liked, she was determined to look her best as mother of the bride. She volunteered to take part in the programme organised through her employer Tameside and Glossop Integrated Care NHS Foundation Trust – and lost 13kg in three months.

‘I was 59 at the time and I’d tried every diet you could think of,’ says Ms Grainger, who is now semi-retired. ‘My weight has gone up and down – and I’d come to the conclusion that I couldn’t lose any more, because of age and the menopause.

‘I went into the programme with an open mind – well, I thought it wouldn’t work, actually. But it worked for me.’

Ms Grainger was one of a second tranche of staff at Tameside Hospital in Greater Manchester to test the Slimpod method – essentially listening to a nine-minute recording designed to change the way that people think about food, and encourage them to make healthy choices. The 12-week programme also involved educational videos looking at topics such as emotional eating.

‘When I went shopping, I didn’t go anywhere near unhealthy food like biscuits and cakes. I was buying more fruits and vegetables – it was an unconscious reaction,’ she says.

As for her daughter’s wedding, she looks back with joy. ‘I could get a fitted dress instead of one that covered all the lumps and bumps, so I achieved what I wanted to do.’