

EATING WELL ON-THE-GO: How Agencies Can Provide Education and Support to Improve Officer Nutrition and Well-Being



LEADERSHIP IN AN ORGANIZATION HAS A ROLE IN ENSURING THE WELL-BEING AND SUCCESS OF ITS EMPLOYEES. Men and women in law enforcement put their lives on the line every day, facing physical and mental demands that can be unpredictable, necessitate quick decision making, and require physical exertion. When a police officer is properly trained and educated by the department, she/he is better equipped to face the demands of the job. This means also encouraging work-life balance and providing opportunities for physical fitness and nutrition education.

Many officers operate in vehicles for the bulk of their shifts. When a vehicle becomes an officer's de facto office, options for meals or snacks and adequate time to consume them are often very limited and are not necessarily the most nutritious options. It is imperative that officers understand how simple nutrition choices can affect them while on the job.

How Nutrition Impacts Work Performance

Good nutrition and adequate hydration can have a direct physiological impact on officers, affecting their abilities to perform safely and effectively on the job. Here are just a few examples:

- Not eating enough or choosing the wrong food options can result in low blood sugar levels, or hypoglycemia. Hypoglycemia can result in lightheadedness or dizziness, blurred/impaired vision, weakness or fatigue.¹
- After eating a high-calorie, high-fat meal, the risk of a heart attack increases for two hours, especially if a person is overweight.²
- An obese officer is more likely to be injured in an auto accident and incur more severe injuries than an officer at a healthy weight.³
- Dehydration can contribute to tiredness, dizziness, or lightheadedness on the job.⁴

How and When to Educate

While nutrition education is as important to officer safety and wellness as wearing a bullet-resistant vest and seat belt, it can be a difficult habit to promote to officers. It is a topic that

must be addressed by the department and supervisors since they set the tone and the culture of the police force. The following is a list of recommendations for how agencies can promote nutrition education to officers department wide.

Academy Training Curriculum: Academy training provides a structured environment to introduce the importance of nutrition to recruits. By introducing healthy living concepts alongside other training topics, recruits can begin to understand how nutrition relates to the larger picture of officer safety and performance. Potential topics to be covered during academy sessions are why it's important to eat healthy – the facts behind nutrition and health; suggestions of what to eat on and off duty; how to read and understand nutrition labels; how to plan meals ahead of schedule; and what to eat when there isn't time to plan ahead. Education in the academy environment is the first step to instill positive and career-long nutrition habits.

In-Service Reinforcement: Once on the job, many officers might succumb to bad habits with regard to nutrition and exercise. As officers progress through their careers, they may face new health concerns

that may be directly related to nutrition and physical activity.

Keeping nutrition education a priority for veteran officers can be accomplished by:

- Requiring annual or semi-annual in-service nutrition education.
- Department-wide nutrition recommendations shared weekly via email.
- Reminders during roll call.
- Supervisors utilizing communication outlets (e.g., email, text messages, radio) to regularly push nutrition suggestions to officers. For example, a supervisor might notify members of a unit that they are short-staffed or have a specialized assignment that day, which may interfere with traditional meal schedules; officers should be informed to plan accordingly.
- Providing educational material such as posters and pamphlets.

Consultation with Experts: While nutrition information is seemingly readily available on the Internet, it also may be advantageous for an agency to partner with a local hospital, medical personnel, or a dietitian to provide tips and strategies that can be catered to law enforcement. Such consultation lends greater credibility to the information being disseminated to officers.

Leadership and Mentoring: While eating healthy is something that needs to be incorporated into training and continuously emphasized by leadership, it is ultimately up to the individual officer to make the right decisions and develop good habits. Having the support and encouragement of law

enforcement supervisors and executives is vital to promoting a healthy eating and exercise culture.

First-line supervisors have the most interaction with officers—and with their leadership roles come the responsibility to promote healthy habits across their units, serve as mentors, and ensure that their officers are doing their jobs effectively. They are in a unique position to encourage positive nutrition behaviors and habits. While good nutrition habits may not be second nature to these leaders, it is important to incorporate these practices within their own routines—for their own health and to influence others. This can be achieved through the following:

Lead by Example: Consciously limit the number of times they go out to eat while on shift.

Know Meal Options: Provide guidance to officers as to when restaurants and grocery stores are open both during the day and during overnight shifts.

Utilize Lunch Breaks: Encourage officers to take a break and leave their cars to eat when possible to establish an eating routine and also get the benefits of physical activity.

Carry Healthy Snack Options and Water: There are inevitably times when breaks and meal routines will be disrupted, so having healthy food on hand is vitally important.

Link Fitness with Nutrition: Organize a pre-shift group run among officers ending with a healthy group breakfast to promote camaraderie.



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¹American Diabetes Association. Hypoglycemia (Low blood glucose). Retrieved July 2, 2014 from <http://www.diabetes.org/living-with-diabetes/treatment-and-care/blood-glucose-control/hypoglycemia-low-blood.html>

²American Heart Association. (2000 November 21). Heavy Meals May Trigger Heart Attacks. ScienceDaily. Retrieved July 2, 2014 from www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2000/11/001120072759.htm

³Rice, T., Zhu, M. (2013 January 21) Emergency Medical Journal. Driver obesity and the risk of fatal injury during traffic collisions. Retrieved from <http://emj.bmj.com/content/31/1/9>
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⁴Mayo Clinic. Diseases and Conditions – Dehydration. Retrieved July 2, 2014 from <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/dehydration/basics/symptoms/con-20030056>