

New York City hospitals cracking down on junk food (Update)

September 24 2012, by Meghan Barr

(AP)—People nervously waiting around in New York City hospitals for loved ones to come out of surgery can't smoke. In a few months from now, they can't have a supersized fast-food soda. And soon, they won't even be able to get a candy bar out of the vending machine or a piece of fried chicken from the cafeteria.

In one of his latest health campaigns, Mayor Michael Bloomberg is aiming to banish sugary and fatty foods from both public and private hospitals.

In recent years, the city's 15 public hospitals have cut calories in patients' meals and restricted the sale of sugary drinks and unhealthy snacks at vending machines. But now the city is tackling hospital cafeteria food, too. And the Healthy Hospital Food Initiative is expanding its reach: In the past year, 16 private hospitals have signed on.

Earlier this month, the city moved to ban the sale of big sodas and other sugary drinks at fast-food restaurants and theaters, beginning in March. Critics say the hospital initiative is yet another sign that Bloomberg is running a "nanny state," even though the guidelines are voluntary and other cities—including Boston—have undertaken similar efforts.

Hospitals say it would be hypocritical of them to serve unhealthy food to patients who are often suffering from obesity and other health problems.

"If there's any place that should not allow smoking or try to make you eat

healthy, you would think it'd be the hospitals," Bloomberg said Monday. "We're doing what we should do and you'll see, I think, most of the private hospitals go along with it."

The cafeteria crackdown will ban deep fryers, make leafy green salads a mandatory option and allow only healthy snacks to be stocked near the cafeteria entrance and at cash registers. At least half of all sandwiches and salads must be made or served with whole grains. Half-size sandwich portions must be available for sale.

"People sometimes right now don't have healthy options," said Christine Curtis, the city Health Department's director of nutrition strategy. "So you are there at 2 in the morning and maybe your only choice is soda and chips."

Marcelle Scott brought her own chips and soda into the lobby of Manhattan's privately operated St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital—there was no vending machine in sight—as she waited for her daughter to give birth Monday. It wasn't the first time the unemployed security guard from the Bronx got the "munchies" for junk food to keep calm while awaiting the outcome of a loved one's medical procedure.

"I like my Snickers and my Mars Bars—especially if I'm nervous for somebody who's inside," she said.

Most hospitals have already overhauled their vending machines by allowing only two types of 12-ounce (360 ml) high-calorie beverages at each vending machine—and they must be featured on the lowest rack. Hospital vending machines have also swapped out most baked goods for snacks like granola bars and nuts.

At privately run Montefiore Medical Center, which operates several hospitals in the Bronx, changes have been under way for a couple of

years.

"We took ice cream out of the cafeterias and began serving more whole grains," said Dr. Andrew Racine, chief medical officer. "We changed white rice to brown rice."

Herbert Padilla, a retired Manhattan hairdresser, was sitting a few feet from a giant coke machine Monday in an outpatient waiting area at St. Luke's-Roosevelt, where he was undergoing treatment for a nerve disorder. He said that in general, he supports efforts to keep people from overdosing on junk food, but "we shouldn't be forced into this by a hospital."

"The mayor is going too far with this. It's ridiculous," he said. "We're being told what to eat and what to drink. We're not living in a free country anymore."

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