

Healthier Chinese Menus

Background

The Healthier Chinese Menu project, led by the Food Safety Unit within Belfast City Council, was based on the recommendations made following the evaluation of a pilot project on takeaways by Northern Group Systems (Environmental Health). Research carried out by the Northern Group Systems' found that, in general, takeaway food is high in fat and salt and are often presented in big portion sizes. As Chinese food is the most popular takeaway food in the UK, with 150 Chinese premises in Belfast alone, Belfast City Council decided to focus on Chinese takeaways. Although traditional Chinese food is healthy, chefs in the UK have adapted their recipes to suit local taste buds as their dishes have become more popular, leading to Chinese dishes becoming less healthy as they adapt to the desire for foods high in fat, salt and sugar and bigger portion sizes. They may also contain monosodium glutamate (MSG), a flavour enhancer which is high in sodium.

Overview of the project

The project, led by the Food Safety Unit within Belfast City Council, involved training Belfast-based Chinese chefs and business food operators in nutrition, healthier (and more traditional) cooking methods and how to market healthier options in their businesses via three one day workshops. To complement the training, each participant was provided with a resource pack, developed and written by Belfast City Council and the dieticians from Belfast Health and Social Care Trust with the assistance of the Chinese National Healthy Living Centre, London in both English and Chinese. The training, given in both English and Cantonese, was provided by the Chinese National Healthy Living Centre, London and celebrity chef Nancy Lam. The project took place over three years, from 2008-2011.

Funding/Partners

The project was part funded by Belfast City Council's Food Safety Unit (approx. £45,000), Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, under their "Fit Futures" strategy (£30,500) and Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland (£5,000). An officer from Belfast City Council worked on the project full time, and Belfast City Council was also responsible for all advertising and general administrative costs.

A multi-disciplinary group of Belfast City Council, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland, Chinese Welfare Association and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce was set up to assist in the implementation of the project.

Aims/Objectives

Aim:

To help improve people's diets and make some sort of impact into diet related diseases and the growing obesity levels in Northern Ireland by encouraging Chinese chefs to cook healthier foods.

Objectives:

- To help improve obesity levels in Northern Ireland
- To train approximately fifty chefs over each three day training course per year.

- To help introduce dishes which are lower in fat, salt and sugar and contain no monosodium glutamate (MSG), aiding restaurants to return to more traditional cooking methods.

Methodology

The project was developed following the recommendations of the evaluation of the Northern Group Systems (Environmental Health) project, which found that participants were in favour of the one day training courses, but suggested that an information pack to accompany the training would be beneficial. The training was subject to a tendering process and the resource pack was developed by Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) in Belfast City Council and the dieticians in Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, with the assistance of Chinese National Healthy Living Centre, London. A project plan was developed to ensure the project was delivered in a timely and efficient manner, and was overseen by the multi-disciplinary group.

Evaluation/Outcomes

The evaluation of the project is ongoing. Participants are given an evaluation questionnaire after the training and feedback so far has been positive. Follow-up visits are carried out in the participating premises, and to date 60% of the premises have devised and advertised healthier options on their menu. The remaining premises need further assistance by EHOs to implement healthier options. The project is hoping to carry out information gathering surveys with the food business operators and customers to evaluate the success of the training and uptake of healthier options.

Sustainability/transferability

The resource pack is available to all councils in Northern Ireland. The resource packs, in the form of CD ROMs, have already been supplied to Northern Group Systems (Environmental Health) and Antrim Borough Council, and it is hoped other councils will use the pack to carry out some form of nutrition intervention with their own Chinese premises so that in time all Chinese food businesses will offer healthier options on their menus and make a greater impact on diet related illness and obesity levels in the general population. The resource pack is also being made available to any agency that requests it. Belfast City Council has developed strong links with the Chinese Welfare Association, who have contacts for most, if not all Chinese businesses in Northern Ireland.

For more information contact

Andrew McClenaghan, [Principal EHO](#), Food Safety, Belfast City Council, Cecil Ward Building, 4 - 10 Linenhall Street, Belfast, BT2 8BP. Tel: 028 9032 0202 ext. 3387. Email: mcclenaghana@belfastcity.gov.uk

Website: <http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/takeaway/index.asp>