



The 500 Club Healthy Eating Program

BY RUTH LAHMAYER, MS, RD, CD

For more than two decades, healthy eating has been a visible focus in the La Crosse, Wis., area. A unique hospital-based community program called the 500 Club was developed by Kay Larson, MS, RD, and the nutrition services team at Gundersen Lutheran in coordination with the Wisconsin Heart Institute in the mid-80s. The 500 Club is a healthy eating program coordinated by Gundersen Lutheran RDs and recommended by cardiac specialists. Selections are controlled in fat and calories and contribute to a healthy eating pattern. The number 500 indicates the approximate amount of calories in a full meal. The goal: To make healthy eating away from home easy and great-tasting for hospital patients, employees, and community members. The philosophy of the 500 Club program is that "all foods can fit in moderation," and the 500 Club-approved meals and selections help people follow U.S. Dietary Guidelines.

The choices are delicious, good-for-you foods designed by RDs and recommended by physicians. Today more than 25 businesses participate in the program, ranging from fine-dining restaurants to quick service counters, delis, cafeterias, colleges, grocery stores, and vending companies. The focus is on good-tasting foods that are controlled in fat and calories.

"The 500 Club is an excellent opportunity to carry our medical center's mission of communi-

ty involvement. Seeing healthy eating choices connected with our medical center right on a restaurant menu provides an immeasurable benefit for the restaurant, health system, and the customer," explains Jennifer Larson, RD, administrative director of the nutrition clinic at Gundersen Lutheran. "We've also built strong alliances with area restaurants and food-service businesses who are our members."

BENEFITS FOR MEMBERS

500 Club members receive a variety of benefits, including opportunities to serve their food selections in Gundersen Lutheran's dining room; exposure to new customers; referrals from Gundersen Lutheran outpatient RDs and weight-management programs; enhanced credibility by partnering with a medical center; new opportunities for promotion and publicity; credible means to meet the demand for healthier fare; and image enhancement by participation with an elite group of businesses that offer healthy eating choices.

"We're committed to serving quality foods that are also good for you," explains Dave Fawver, owner of Jimmy John's Gourmet Sand-

wiches in La Crosse. "We are pleased to be a member of the 500 Club program. It puts a stamp of approval on our selections and gives us another marketing avenue."

IMPLEMENTATION

After joining the program and paying a modest yearly membership fee, the member meets with the RD/program coordinator for assessment of menu options. Every effort is made to qualify current menu items so implementation is simplified. Some menus may include development of new items, which is accomplished with assistance from Gundersen Lutheran's certified executive chef.

The marketing department develops a menu insert or separate handout that identifies 500 Club-approved selections and provides nutrition information. Members may use their own printing service to incorporate the 500 Club menu right into their existing menu. For quick-service restaurants, green 500 Club menu decals are provided.

TRAINING AND MONITORING

Once members launch their 500 Club menu, the program coordinator trains them in the areas of portion control, basic nutrition information, and program philosophy. After a period of three to six months, a staff RD becomes a customer, orders 500 Club selections, and provides written evaluation of the service, presentation, and portion control adherence.

VENDING OPTIONS

Stansfield Vending was one of the first 500 Club members. They were interested in communicating the message that vending foods can fit into a healthy eating pattern. "It's a program we couldn't afford to develop on our own," explains owner, Janet Stansfield Hess. "We don't have the resources, the time, or the expertise. The 500 Club program was ready to go and easy to implement. The success has been tremendous: 15% to 20% of our cold food production carries the 500 Club logo and five to six selections in our snack machines are 500 Club-approved."

MEMBER BRANDING AT THE HOSPITAL

Member restaurants are invited to serve in Gundersen Lutheran's dining room with more than 1,000 daily lunchtime patrons. A calendar of 500 Club restaurants serving in the dining

room is published and posted. A different member is featured nearly every day. Restaurants offer two to three 500 Club-approved selections, such as sandwiches, salads, pasta dishes, or full-meal combinations. This becomes a promotional opportunity for members because they can offer copies of their menus, catering information, and special offers, such as coupons, to encourage customers to visit their restaurants. Additionally, it's an added employee benefit for the medical center staff to have a wide variety of healthy eating options available.

EXPOSURE AND MEDIA

In addition to the monthly 500 Club guest restaurants, Gundersen Lutheran's dining room offers a daily 500 Club menu special with detailed nutrition facts available on the nutrition clinic's Web site.

A weekly 500 Club column in the food page of the *La Crosse Tribune* highlights new members as they come on board and features guest columns from Gundersen Lutheran's RDs. Additional media exposure is gained through frequent interviews on local television and radio news reports. Members are encouraged to use the 500 Club logo in their advertising campaigns and incorporate healthy eating messages into their marketing materials.

WORDS OF ADVICE

If you're considering developing a healthy eating program in your region, be aware that development and coordination is a major project that will require the following:

Organizational Commitment

Financial commitment from a hospital, medical center, or health organization anchors the program. This support can be pursued by meeting with administrative directors and appealing to their mission of community service, being part of the solution for obesity, and providing access to healthy eating choices. The 500 Club program is designed to generate revenue to cover some of the base costs, but staff RD time, marketing, development, and other costs may exceed revenues, so it's essential to present the program as a community-service effort.

RD Involvement

Coordination and implementation by an RD with expertise in the areas of culinary arts, menu development, and marketing is essential, and adequate time for presentations, meetings,

menu development, and training is necessary.

Marketing Commitment

Media exposure opportunities for healthy-eating topics have never been more popular, and having marketing assistance for developing media releases and pitching news stories is essential. It provides an opportunity to incorporate the healthy-eating programs and the health system into one story.

RDs involved with the 500 Club are regularly approached for interviews and expert advice because of the exposure they've received. Additionally, any publications or newsletters that will accept RD-written columns on healthy eating can help promote the program and other services.

— Ruth Lahmayer, MS, RD, CD, is the 500 Club coordinator at Gundersen Lutheran Health System.

Sample 500 Club Meal

Chicken Italiano: Herb-marinated grilled chicken topped with fresh tomato, basil, and Provolone cheese. Served with linguine and marinara sauce. Includes a garden salad with fat-free Italian dressing and raspberry sorbet for dessert.

Complete Meal: Approximately 594 calories, 9 grams of fat (17% of calories), 68 grams of carbohydrates, and 48 grams of protein.

Portions:

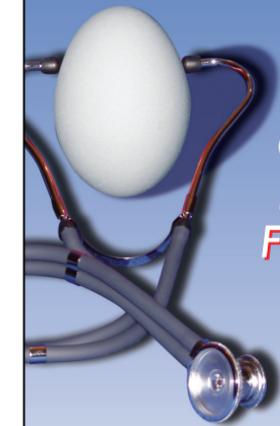
- Chicken Italiano
- 4 oz cooked weight herb-marinated chicken
- 2 fresh tomato slices
- 3 basil leaves
- ½ oz Provolone cheese
- 1 cup cooked spaghetti
- ½ cup marinara sauce

Garden salad (mixed greens, raw veggies)

- 3 oz fat-free Italian dressing
- 3 oz raspberry sorbet

— RL

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