A sign of success in the campaign to raise nutritional awareness in the military is that the message appears to be influencing the options dining facilities make available, as well as the choices made by service members.

Even beverages and desserts, two categories more commonly associated with empty calories and fat, are evolving to better fulfill changing military dietary guidelines and goals for improved nutrition, which help soldiers to perform optimally, recover rapidly from stress, illness and injury, and remain healthy and alert for the long term.

Beverages available for consumption in military dining facilities are becoming a significant source of the vital nutrients that contribute to a service members’ balanced daily diet.

With more of the beverages available to service members containing critical vitamins and minerals, or having reduced levels of fat and sugar, the military considers the category a means to correct under consumption and improve nutrition.

“Reformulating products, or making alternative choices, also provides an opportunity to moderate the total intake of sugars and other ingredients of concern,” said Ray Hosey, food service systems analyst, Joint Culinary Center of Excellence (JCCoE) Concepts, Systems and Policy Division. “Better food and beverage choices mean better bodies, better performance and quicker recovery from injury or stress; readiness and resilience matter.”

BEVERAGES ON TAP
Army menu standards list the foods and beverages that must be offered in dining facilities and suggest others that can be available to soldiers. Mandatory beverages include 100 percent fruit juices at breakfast, low-fat milk at all meals and coffee and tea. In addition to these choices, dining facilities are encouraged to have decaffeinated hot beverages, lactose-free milk/milk alternatives fortified with vitamin D and calcium and vitamin-enhanced flavored waters, based on customer demands.

“The mandatory 100 percent fruit juice at breakfast is set to insure that a great natural source of vitamins and mineral is provided (especially vitamin C and potassium),” he said. “The mandatory nature is limited to breakfast as the 100 percent juice is expensive.”

Sodas may be offered at permanent party dining facilities, but the variety is designed to offer low-calorie and caffeine-free items. Also, going a step further, appropriated fund dining facilities exclude from assortments any over-fortified/over-caffeinated beverages (energy drinks).

A traditional assortment of beverages is available in Army dining facilities during
the breakfast, lunch and dinner meal times. Beverages are available self-serve, except for lactose-free milk alternatives that are in single-serve packages.

Some adjustment to the assortment is made during the day, mostly to ensure that 100 percent juice is available at breakfast.

Some changes were also made to the traditional beverage assortment over the years, especially for certain populations in training status.

“During the training cycle, when habits are being reset, the Army initial entry training locations emphasize the positive beverages and limit access to the detrimental ones,” Hosey said.

DESSERTS

In addition to improving the nutritional value and variety of foods available in dining facilities, military menu standards also promote moderating total calories and fat levels without eliminating the fun factor.

Desserts remain a counterpoint to the goal of improved nutrition, in accordance with, yet still in contrast to, the fixed rules with regard to reduced levels of fat, sugar and preservatives.

“Much like the beverage choices, menu standards are referenced, and local ideas are incorporated regularly,” Hosey said. While not rejecting ready-made desserts, he suggests local preparation “most of the time,” as a way to achieve “the best variety, best portion control and least issue with ingredients of concern.”

The “fresh is best” approach allows more natural ingredients to be used while minimizing or eliminating preservatives, he explained. “Even when having fun, we are looking to do better on products and ingredients.”

The military also meets with manufacturers regularly to learn about new options or other changes that can add to variety or better satisfy diet and nutritional requirements. Some manufacturers are responding by moderating serving sizes and using alternative ingredients that result in fewer preservatives, artificial or other concerns, such as trans fats, partially hydrogenated oils and artificial sweeteners.

“‘Artificial,’ or more chemistry, is not the goal here,” Hosey said. “Some are adding specific ingredients to dessert formulations to help improve the ‘just fun’ to a ‘fun with benefits.’”

Smaller portion sizes for the dessert option available in military dining facilities also contributes to the goal of moderating total calories and fat consumed.

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For the benefit of service members at the Presidio of Monterey, Calif., staff members did away with deep-fried foods in favor of baked, grilled and roasted alternatives.
establishes policy for the Department of Defense Food Service Program. Defense Logistics Agency Troop Support makes purchases in accordance with these standards, as well as any additional requirements that may be specific to the Army or the other service branches.

“If the Army chooses a specific type of beverage,” he said, “it is done so following the ‘Doing Business with the Army’ guide and the ‘Buyers Guide’ found on the JCCoE website.”

Each beverage or food contains a unique set and level of nutrients. Milk, yogurt, hard cheeses and spinach are good sources of calcium, while beef, lentils and eggs are high in iron and sweet potatoes and bananas contain high levels of potassium.

“We look to the citrus fruits and juices, fresh cabbage, tomatoes and strawberries as excellent sources of vitamin C,” Hosey said, “while folate can be found in dark green leafy veggies and fortified grain/cereal products, and plentiful other B vitamins can be found in legumes (dry beans), poultry and fish.”

All vitamins and minerals should be consumed within minimum and maximum levels for a balanced diet. “No one thing does it all, so a mixed and varied diet over the week is essential for balance and ultimately health and performance,” Hosey said.

“Remember Goldilocks – too much or too little, and it’s not good.”

Allowing that 10 percent of daily calorie intake for an individual can be discretionary, Hosey estimates that leaves a modest 200 calories per day out of a normal diet of 2,000 calories that can be budgeted for dessert.

“That calorie budget thereby influences the recommended portion size, recognizing that treats could be in the form of liquid or solid – soda or cookie,” he said.