

Case Study 4

Healthy Choices and Commercial Determinants

Sport and Recreation centres promote physical activity, health and wellbeing. However, many also sell and promote foods and drinks high in sugar, salt and saturated fat. The Victorian Healthy Choices Guidelines support healthier food environments by improving the availability, placement and promotion of healthier options.

A student-led project involving Master of Dietetics students from Swinburne University explored barriers and enablers to implementing Healthy Choices across recreation centres in Melbourne's Inner and Outer East. Using FoodChecker audits, stakeholder interviews and a literature review, the project examined how commercial determinants shape food retail environments.

While many centre managers supported healthier food environments, implementation was affected by profitability concerns, exclusive supplier contracts, limited infrastructure, perceived demand for less healthy products and limited control over product placement and stock. These findings show that food choices are shaped not only by individual preference, but by systems that influence what is available, affordable, visible and promoted.

Various practical actions implemented through the project helped shift the focus from individual responsibility to the food environment and the systems that shape choice. They align with Healthy Choices by increasing GREEN options, limiting RED options and ensuring healthier products are promoted and easy to see. The project also challenged assumptions about consumer demand. Community interest in healthier options appeared stronger than some managers expected, suggesting demand for less healthy products should not be treated as fixed.

The findings provide useful baseline information to guide future work with Sport and Recreation centres. Using a Commercial Determinants lens alongside Healthy Choices helps organisations ask not only how to encourage healthier choices, but what commercial and organisational conditions shape the choices available. By reviewing contracts, strengthening policies and making healthier options visible, affordable and appealing, Recreation centres can make healthier choices easier and more accessible.

Healthy choices are not just about individual behaviour, they are shaped by the environments, commercial practices and systems in which people participate.



Image: A commercial fridge stocked with water