



From Fork to Farm: Food Composting in the Healthcare Industry



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At Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center in Seattle, a young patient eats a dinner of chicken strips, green salad, fruit salad and milk.

After staff return the trays to the kitchen, they wipe everything from the plates into a food composting tub with the leftovers of the day's meals.

Modern industrial composting services have revolutionized food composting, allowing non-traditional items like meat to be tossed in with the rest, making the process faster, cheaper and greener.

We usually think of composting as an obscure practice of a few environmentally-conscious households. In 2007, 63 hospitals nationally composted food, according to a survey by Health Care Without Harm. This cuts their waste, saves money and allows them to market their food facilities as green. The benefits don't stop at the hospital doors. By cutting the amount of food waste in landfills, composting reduces one of the most lethal of greenhouse gas emissions, methane gas.

Each hospital takes its own approach to food composting. They may compost only kitchen scraps. Others may compost uneaten food on patient's trays and leftovers from meals served to employees and visitors.

Some hospitals compost plates, napkins, cups, and even utensils. In 2007, 53 hospitals used bio-based food service items, produced from materials like corn, potatoes and sugars, enabling them to toss everything into the tubs together.

The tubs are lined with biodegradable bags. That means that both the bag and its contents are composted. No plastic bags. That's important because when food in plastic bags goes to a landfill, it creates methane gas, which the EPA estimates is 21 times worse than carbon dioxide.

Kitchen staff loads the bags into a compost dumpster. Twice a week, a composting truck empties it, hauling the waste to a facility where it decomposes and is later resold as a nutrient-dense soil additive.

Hospitals save money and the environment by composting. Food waste weighs a lot and since landfills charge by the ton, reducing trash weight cuts what hospitals spend to dispose of their garbage.

U.S. hospitals generate about 170,000 tons of food waste annually, according to EPA figures. In 2007, Children's Hospital sent their regional composting facility 58 tons,

95 percent of its total food waste, trimming \$160 a month from its disposal budget. The savings don't end with the waste budget - \$30 a day was saved on water bills since the garbage disposal got less use.

There are around 5,700 hospitals in the U.S. according to the American Hospital Association. If one midsized hospital is experiencing these benefits by composting their food waste, imagine if the others tried it. Sixty-three have. Why haven't more?

In short, the benefits aren't widely known and fears typical to new practices are wide-spread. Hospitals don't always know the savings they're missing and haven't asked what composting facilities exist in their region.

Complicating matters have been worries that food composters smell worse and attract more pests than garbage, which the EPA recommends combating through staff education programs.

Another hurdle comes from kitchen layouts. Factors like whether a conveyor belt carries trays to the cleaning station or diners toss their leftovers into garbage cans can determine how easily a hospital can introduce composting.

For some hospitals, industrial composting isn't yet available in their region. For the rest, these arguments against composting just don't hold water. Transition costs like compostable garbage bags, bio-based service ware and staff training are quickly offset by savings to the waste disposal budget. Children's Hospital says it's already realizing 30 percent savings since it started composting in April 2007.

Kitchen layouts may slow transitioning the cafeteria to food composting, but that's no reason not to compost kitchen scraps and patient trays. When it's time for renovations, green practices can be introduced to make cafeterias compost-friendly.

Ultimately, all the issues that prevent hospitals from adopting composting can be resolved. And the beauty of that isn't just the budgetary savings, or the green marketing opportunities that come from it. It's that hospitals can expand the scope of their healing, not just treating patients within their walls but also improving the environment in which they live every day.

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