

Abstract

Caring Through Food: The Impact of Food Aesthetics on Patients' Experience in Care Settings

Stefano Testa¹, Elena Pizzi^{1,2}

¹ Nursing Degree Programme, Orbassano Campus, Department of Clinical and Biological Sciences, University of Turin, Turin, Italy

² AOU San Luigi Gonzaga, Orbassano, Turin, Italy
(Corresponding Author: testastefano@hotmail.com)

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Introduction. Visual stimuli can stimulate appetite through reward-related neural circuits even when energy requirements have already been met. However, the presentation of hospital food is generally not perceived positively by patients. The aim of this study was to investigate the effects of an intervention designed to improve food presentation in healthcare settings.

Methods. A single-arm pre-post observational study with a mixed-methods approach was conducted to evaluate the impact of food aesthetics on patient satisfaction, mood, palatability, dietary intake, and interaction with healthcare staff. The intervention focused on breakfast presentation without modifying food quality or selection and was implemented in three settings: nursing homes, Oncology, and Hospice. Data were collected using the Fluid and Food Estimation Diagram (FFED), a questionnaire, and a semi-structured interview.

Results. Thirty-four participants were enrolled, with a mean age of 77 years; 68% were female. Wilcoxon and McNemar tests showed statistically significant improvements in satisfaction, mood, and palatability, while no significant differences emerged in interaction with healthcare staff. Dietary intake measured using the FFED showed a reduction in caloric intake during the intervention compared with baseline, although the difference was not statistically significant. Qualitative analysis identified an increase in positive emotions associated with the intervention.

Discussion. Interventions targeting food presentation may enhance patient experience and perceived quality of care, with the greatest benefits observed for mood-related outcomes. Although no significant effect on caloric intake was identified, the overall findings support the integration of aesthetic strategies into healthcare food services and encourage further research in this area.

Keywords: Food Aesthetics, Patient Satisfaction, Mood

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