Eating and Drinking in the ED

Eating and Drinking at ED Workstations is Permissible

Caring about our members’ well-being, ACEP worked with The Joint Commission to clarify that emergency staff can eat at an ED work station during their shifts.

TJC standards do not specifically address where staff can have food and drink in work areas. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) also does NOT have a prohibition against the consumption of food and beverages at work stations, including those in the emergency department. However, some hospitals do have rules that restrict the ability for emergency staff to eat or drink in the ED.

Not being able to have a drink or eat in the ED can significantly impact both the physical well being of emergency physicians and their decision-making ability, and therefore risks impacting not just their own health, but that of their patients too.

The FAQs can provide emergency physicians with background on the current rules and regulations around eating and drinking in the ED, and can be a useful resource to help educate hospital leaders about this important issue.

What can you do? Start advocating!

ACEP recommends that emergency physicians take the following steps to advocate for change in their hospitals:
EDUCATION: Make sure that your hospital understands the OSHA regulations and the role of the Joint Commission. Sometimes policies were put into place years ago by previous administrators without the full knowledge and understanding of the actual requirements. ACEP’s FAQ sheet should help.

HEALTH AND SAFETY CONCERNS: ED shifts are physically and mentally demanding, and evidence suggests that emergency physicians become dehydrated by the end of their shift (Alomar et al. International Journal of Emergency Medicine, “Decreased Hydration Status of Emergency Department Physicians and Nurses by the End of their Shift,” 2013, 6:27; available at: http://www.intjem.com/content/6/1/27). Dehydration can definitely impact clinical performance and patient safety. Emergency physicians need to be able to drink and eat to ensure that their patients at the end of their shift receive the same clinical judgment as their patients from the beginning of their shift.

UNDERSTAND STATE LAWS AND REGULATIONS: While there is an OSHA requirement that an employer provide drinking water to employees in their workplaces, OSHA does not require employers to give their staff rest or meal breaks. However, different states have laws and regulations around breaks and eating and drinking in the workplace. For more information on labor laws in your state, please visit https://www.dol.gov/whd/state/state.htm.