

Date 10/12/2025
Your Ref
Our Ref 10829

Enquiries to Richard Mutch
Extension 35687
Direct Line 0131 465 5687
loth.freedomofinformation@nhs.scot
richard.mutch@nhs.scot

Dear

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION – PATIENT MEALS

I write in response to your request for information in relation to patient meals.

Question:

1. In the week beginning 3 November, how much did the NHS spend on food for patients?

Answer:

I am advised that we do not have figures specific for the date requested.

Under the Freedom of Information Act NHS Lothian is not required to create new records to enable it to respond to your enquiry. This information is not collated or held in aggregate form and it would be necessary to review all case files **relating to patient meals** over the period you have requested to assemble the information you seek. Even if NHS Lothian did this – and there would be significant cost implications in doing so – it would be unable to respond in full to your request. The information requested is therefore exempt under section 12.1 – Cost.

Question:

2. In the week beginning 3 November 2025, what was the nutritional value of each standard meal provided to patients?

Answer:

In NHS Lothian our standard menu is made up from a three-week menu cycle offering a range of options at each meal to meet patients' nutritional needs and preference. In addition, we offer eight other a la carte menus to support a range of therapeutic, lifestyle and religious dietary requirements.

Our patient meals are nutritionally analysed using specified menu analysis criteria to ensure that they meet the **Food in Hospitals (Scotland) Specification (2016)**. This includes compliance with recommended targets for energy (kcal), macronutrients (protein, fat, carbohydrate), and salt, based on defined portion sizes and meal patterns across the day. The complete menu cycle is assessed against the Specification using set parameters for daily and weekly nutritional provision, rather than individual dishes. This ensures that the needs of

Headquarters
Mainpoint
102 West Port
Edinburgh EH3 9DN

Chair Professor John Connaghan CBE
Chief Executive Professor Caroline Hiscox
*Lothian NHS Board is the common
name of Lothian Health Board*

different patient groups — such as those who are nutritionally well or nutritionally vulnerable — are met over the course of the day week or menu cycle depending on the relevant parameter. Nutritional analysis information is audited nationally to ensure compliance.

Question:

3. In the week beginning 3 November 2025, what was the calorie content of each standard meal provided to patients?

Answer:

As already mentioned, our patient meals are calculated through standardised menu analysis and are aligned to and comply with the **Food in Hospitals (Scotland) Specification (2016)**. This includes compliance with recommended targets for energy (kcal), macronutrients (protein, fat, carbohydrate), and salt, based on defined portion sizes and meal patterns across the day.

Question:

4. In the week beginning 3 November 2025, how many standard patient meals contained ultra processed food?

Answer:

This question cannot be answered accurately because there is no nationally agreed or operational definition of “ultra-processed food” within NHS Scotland or the wider UK public sector.

The most commonly used “definition” of “ultra – processed food” is derived from the NOVA classification system (University of São Paulo), which categorises foods based on the extent and purpose of industrial processing. This classification system was not devised for operational use in hospital menu analysis, procurement systems, or food-service audits. This position is supported by the following national documents:

- **British Dietetic Association (2021)** – There is no consistent definition of “processed” or “ultra-processed” foods. Nutritional quality and dietary context are more important than the degree of processing. Some processed or ultra-processed foods can play a beneficial role in meeting nutritional needs, particularly for individuals with specific dietary requirements.
- **Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN, 2023)** – Evidence linking ultra-processed foods to adverse health outcomes is inconsistent and confounded. SACN does not endorse NOVA for UK dietary policy, surveillance, or operational decision-making.
- **World Health Organization / FAO (2023)** – Acknowledge the popularity of the term “ultra-processed” but confirm that it is not a standardised or legally defined category at international or national level.
- **NHS Guidance** – The NHS “Live Well” resources define “processed food” broadly (as any food altered in preparation) but make no reference to “ultra-processed” food as a recognised category.

The NHS does not currently hold data classifying ingredients or meals under NOVA or any similar framework. To do this would require significant system redevelopment or upgrades, as well as new interpretation and subjective judgement. Existing menu-analysis and procurement systems do not currently offer that functionality.

Under the Freedom of Information Act NHS Lothian is not required to create new records to enable it to respond to your enquiry. This information is not collated or held in aggregate form and it would be necessary to review all case files relating to patient meals over the period you have requested to assemble the information you seek. Even if NHS Lothian did this – and there would be significant cost implications in doing so – it would be unable to respond in full to your request. The information requested is therefore exempt under section 12.1 – Cost.

However, most of the meals provided from our standard hospital menu are prepared from scratch within one of our five production kitchens at Western General Hospital, East Lothian Community Hospital, Royal Hospital for Children and Young People, Royal Edinburgh Hospital, and St John's Hospital. We use fresh and minimally processed ingredients for preparing our soups, main courses, vegetables and desserts which are made on-site to ensure nutritional quality, food safety, and patient satisfaction.

A small proportion of items on the standard menu are commercially produced to ensure consistency, safety, and compliance within large-scale catering standards. These can include lightly sweetened yoghurts and baked beans for example.

NHS Lothian is committed to providing high-quality, balanced, and nutritious meals for patients. This needs to be done in line with the frameworks of **Food in Hospitals (Scotland) Specification (2016)** and **Healthcare Improvement Scotland Food, Fluid and Nutrition Standards (2014)** to provide nutritional safety, balance and clinical suitability. Where possible, we balance this by using National Procurement systems and protocols that encourage sourcing goods locally wherever possible and supporting our sustainability goals.

I hope the information provided helps with your request.

If you are unhappy with our response to your request, you do have the right to request us to review it. Your request should be made within 40 working days of receipt of this letter, and we will reply within 20 working days of receipt. If our decision is unchanged following a review and you remain dissatisfied with this, you then have the right to make a formal complaint to the Scottish Information Commissioner within 6 months of receipt of our review response. You can do this by using the Scottish Information Commissioner's Office online appeals service at www.itspublicknowledge.info/Appeal. If you remain dissatisfied with the Commissioner's response you then have the option to appeal to the Court of Session on a point of law.

If you require a review of our decision to be carried out, please write to the FOI Reviewer at the email address at the head of this letter. The review will be undertaken by a Reviewer who was not involved in the original decision-making process.

FOI responses (subject to redaction of personal information) may appear on NHS Lothian's Freedom of Information website at: <https://org.nhsllothian.scot/FOI/Pages/default.aspx>

Yours sincerely

ALISON MACDONALD
Executive Director, Nursing
Cc: Chief Executive