



# baby steps

## Magee-Womens Hospital Leads the Way in Greening Initiatives

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**GREGORY BROWN KNOWS** exactly how to increase sales in the cafeteria at Magee-Womens Hospital of UPMC. "I'd get a longer line if I sold pierogies dripping in butter instead of the polenta lasagna I had today," says Brown, the hospital's food service director.

But Magee won't be adding pierogies to its menu any time soon.

A member of the hospital's "green team," Brown knows that modern medicine and dedicated doctors are only part of the health puzzle. The foods we eat, the products we use, and the air we breathe all play a role in overall health. In recent years, Magee has steered patients, visitors and staff toward healthier foods and safer products—and other hospitals are starting to take notice. "One of my biggest goals is to take what we've learned here and been successful with and then help other facilities do the same," says Judy Focareta, an energetic RN and Magee's head tree-hugger (or, as her business card reads, "Coordinator, Environmental Health Initiatives").

One of the hospital's first such initiatives was to eliminate products that contain mercury, which has been linked to everything from insomnia to brain damage. That meant replacing thermometers, blood pressure cuffs, fluorescent lights, and other ubiquitous equipment. "We're probably about 98 percent mercury-free," says Focareta. "We still have some light fixtures to trade out." Ridding the neonatal intensive care unit of a plasticizer, known as DEHP, was another early undertaking. Exposure to DEHP, found in intravenous tubing and other medical devices, is associated with abnormalities in the reproductive organs of newborn boys. "Then we decided to look at environmental health in general," Focareta recounts. "And what we found was that there are about 80,000 chemicals in use today that are virtually untested. So we don't know what they're capable of doing, but we do know that since they've been introduced, there's been a rise in asthma, cancer, autism, learning disabilities. You can't say, 'Oh my God, this is causing that,' because you don't know for sure. But it makes you suspicious."

It can also make you throw up your hands in defeat. "People often say: '80,000 chemicals! Well forget it. There's nothing I can do about that. But everybody can do something about that,'" Focareta says. In 2009 Magee began offering a crash course in environmental health for childbearing families. It IS Easy Being Green covers topics such as mercury levels in fish, pesticides in produce, and toxins in toys. Parents-to-be are urged to take baby steps—Focareta cautions against hyper-cautiousness—to reduce exposure to environmental hazards (see sidebar).

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But the biggest news of 2009 was Magee's foray into the farming business. Not content to simply espouse the benefits of locally grown and organic produce, the green team decided to get its nails dirty. With funding from the Heinz Endowments and guidance from Phipps Conservatory, Focareta and company transformed three courtyards into organic gardens. And in the months that followed, patients, visitors, and staff enjoyed the fruits (and vegetables) of their labors: tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, carrots, cabbages, radishes, zucchinis and more.

It was a first for a Pittsburgh hospital. As far as Focareta knows, Magee is the first U.S. hospital to grow food onsite.

Odds are that it won't be the last. Phipps has already been contacted by another Pittsburgh hospital about creating similar gardens, says Kelly Ogrodnik, sustainable design and programs manager at the conservatory. "Gardens have been proven to speed up healing time for people in hospitals," she says. "But it goes beyond that for Magee. Not only are they providing healing gardens for their patients, they are also providing an opportunity for parents to introduce their kids to the beauty of gardens and the healthy aspects of organic gardening."



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The gardens are dotted with informational signage. In the cafeteria, a leaf logo identifies dishes prepared with foods from the gardens—a bruschetta with homegrown tomatoes, for example, or a lemon chicken salad with homegrown lemon basil.

Each year, Phipps will bring in more perennial plants, which are good for the soil and cost less than annuals. Strawberries will be introduced this spring, when the gardens enter their third year.

Focareta also hopes to unveil a green roof in the spring. By planting vegetation on its roofs, Magee can reduce storm water runoff and the amount of energy used to heat and cool its buildings.

Other items on her wish list will take more time. “I would love to see a no-plastic world,” she says. “But right now, plastics are ubiquitous. They’re everywhere.

### TIPS FOR CHILDBEARING FAMILIES

Most expectant mothers know to avoid alcohol and cigarettes. Here are five lesser-known ways to protect baby’s health—and yours.

**[1]** Avoid antibacterial soaps, which contain a pesticide linked to cancer and may contribute to the rise of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

**[2]** Opt for fragrance-free products. A fragrance may contain hundreds of chemicals.

**[3]** Avoid Teflon-coated pans. Choose stainless steel cookware without copper bottoms.

**[4]** Avoid storing food in plastic containers, opting for alternatives such as glass. If using plastic, choose items numbered 1, 2, 4, or 5 and avoid those numbered 3, 6, and 7. Wash plastic containers by hand. Never microwave them, and throw away any that are scratched or worn.

**[5]** Look for toys made of natural materials such as wood. Visit [HealthyToys.org](http://HealthyToys.org) before purchasing toys and other children’s products.

Until that changes and things are not manufactured as much in plastics, at least we’re recycling.” A few years ago, Magee’s food service team started to phase out use of Styrofoam containers and plastic utensils, replacing them with compostable products. Trouble was, the hospital didn’t have a way to compost those products, so they were being thrown into the trash, destined for landfills. Magee switched back to Styrofoam and plastics, which don’t biodegrade and can leak chemicals into food and drinks. But the dream hasn’t died. “It’s not an easy issue,” Focareta says. “We’re not allowed to do onsite composting because of the risk of bacteria or bugs or vermin. I would love to find a company that could take our food scraps and compostables every day.”

Brown and his counterparts at other UPMC hospitals began meeting earlier this year to discuss best practices and brainstorm solutions to challenges like composting. One of the first things they did was tour the gardens at Magee. “Is it local? Is it organic? Is it conserving energy of some sort? Is it recyclable? Those are questions that we’re asking ourselves first, before we look at the price or other things,” Brown says.