

Social-Cultural Factors in Nutrition

MbchB L2

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Food Choices:

1. What factors determine what you eat everyday?
2. Listen to the role play and note down all the factors raised

Food choices

The choices of food we make depends on:

1. availability (supply & physical availability)
2. accessibility (costs & physical access)
3. And to some extent, social & cultural factors
4. Tradition & social values also dictate which foods we consider appropriate.

- Humans accept food items as '**edible**' & reject them as "**inedible**" on a number of sensory & cultural characteristics.
- Personal preferences for taste, smell, appearance, texture determines which foods we eat.
- Food preferences & eating habits are also learned as part of culture, national & social background.

For Discussion & thought

- Peer Pressure: changes as society's values change
- Such changes in peer pressure also influence food choices
- What is your favourite food?
- How have changes in peer pressure in your life as a student at the UoN influenced your food choices.

Cultural Symbolic Dimensions of food

- Hot-Cold & Other Binary Dimensions
- Health Factors
- Age & Gender combined
- Illnesses
- Ritual and Economic Status

Hot-Cold & Other Binary Dimensions

- hot-cold, wet-dry, male-female, heavy-light, yin-yang, pure-impure, clean-poison, and ripe-unripe.
- “symbolic” classification of food may not refer to measurable or single objective qualities of food
- Brings together different social & cultural domains e.g. plants, animals, medicine, health, rituals & social relations.
- meaning & nutritional significance vary according to cultural context, but also individual inclination to "follow the rules."

Health Factors

These are thought to be good for health & well being.

- Safe-harmless food;
- Nutritious;
- Vitamin-rich,
- Tonic-

Age & gender factors in food selection

- Certain food considered to be good for only certain individuals & occasions- children, adults, women;
- During scarcity, high quality diets are mainly consumed by those of high social status, which depends on long established cultural patterns, economic productivity or power.
- The most vulnerable (young children, child bearing women & the old are often dependent & excluded from political power and high cultural status.
- male and female foods

Illnesses

- Culturally recognized "illness" is marked by alteration in eating behaviour as part of "social behaviours" in most of the world.
- Unwillingness to eat & lack of appetite are signs of illness;
- Restoration of "normal" appetite is the sign of a renewed health state.
- Culturally, it is important to understand general rules for handling respiratory & digestive disorders through diet.
- E.g. of illnesses: Diarrhoea, fever,

Socio-cultural construction of Diets

Dietary Structures in diet selection

Food consumption may be structured in terms of dietary patterns or “food habits” - How often one eats, times of day or night that one eats, the kinds of food eaten generally & on each occasion, & with whom one eats are ways of communicating information about one's own social & cultural identity & relationships with others.

- The "food code" – types of foods (e.g. cooked vs uncooked) one consumes at particular times of the day –
- And the people one invites to share each meals/feast are important in understanding cultural rules of etiquette, identity, & membership in social groups (Douglas, 1972).

Dietary structure (cont...)

- Food patterns are constructed by encoding foods according to their place in the diet:
 - "meal items" (staples e.g. cereals, tubers)
 - "relishes" (i.e. preparations eaten along with staples e.g. vegetables, meat stew, fish)
 - "condiments" e.g. salt, spices, herbs
 - "snack foods," i.e. "uncooked" & eaten outside main meal

Meal Vs Snack

- **What constitutes a "meal," as opposed to a "snack," is defined in every culture, & this definition determines what foods are appropriate at different times of the day.**

Social Factors in Diet Selection

- Food is a focus for social interaction & may be a determinant of social acceptance.
- Food-sharing rules enable people/societies to maintain co-operation for other pursuits e.g. meetings over a cup of tea, Luncheons, dinner, a party, family gathering etc.
- Food-sharing rules are ensure systematic distribution of environmental resources from fortunate to less fortunate groups & individuals.

Social Behaviours:

Social behaviors affect nutrition in terms of:

- 1. Food intake** (why do certain communities eat only specific foods)- are they able to meet their nutritional needs?
- 2. Consumption of potential good food sources of various nutrients.**

Examples:

- Cultural-specific food habits & taboos for feeding children, adolescents, & women restrict consumption of nutritious foods. : poor intake of vit.A -rich foods is not mainly due to lack of such food in households, but HOW & WITH WHOM children eat their meals (Ref: *Michael Gibney, et. Al (2006). Public Health Nutrition pg 201.*

For thought and discussion

- **Why were women & children forbidden in certain communities from eating e.g. Chicken, eggs, certain parts of meat.**
- **Do these practices still exist?**

Child feeding practices

- What is the effect of modernization on child feeding practices, and particularly breastfeeding ?
- What is the role of fathers and grandparents in promoting and supporting breastfeeding.