

Factors affecting food choice

Foundation

2 Learning objectives

To understand the importance of eating a balanced diet for good health.

To understand the variety of factors that influence food choice.

To know the sources and types of information available to help people make informed food choices.

3 Balanced diet

Eating the right balance of a wide range of foods provides most people with the energy and nutrients that they need to stay healthy.

A balanced diet, together with regular physical activity, can help people to maintain a healthy weight and may reduce their chance of developing diet related illness, such as obesity.

4 The guide for a balanced diet

All around the world people choose to eat different foods for many different reasons.

The eatwell plate provides guidance in the UK on how everyone can achieve a healthy varied diet.

5 Factors influencing food choice

Food choices for a balanced diet depend on many factors, such as:

- individual energy and nutrient needs;
- health concerns;
- cultural or religious practices;
- cost;
- food availability;
- food preference;

- social considerations;
- environmental considerations;
- advertising.

6 Individual energy and nutrient needs

The amount of energy, carbohydrate, fat, protein, vitamins and minerals needed differs between different age groups and between males and females.

For example, women of child-bearing age should consume high amounts of folate and folic acid to decrease the risk of foetal neural tube defects, e.g. spina bifida.

Energy needs also depend on activity levels. Athletes will have much higher energy requirements due to their high level of physical activity.

7 Health concerns

Diets which exclude many foods due to a person's health concerns or medical reasons need to be planned carefully.

For example, someone who is lactose intolerant cannot eat some dairy products so they must make sure that they eat other foods which are good sources of calcium, e.g. soft edible bones in fish such as salmon or sardines.

8 Cultural or religious practices

Ethical and religious practices, such as avoiding meat, may limit the range of foods people eat.

For example, a strict Buddhist will not consume any meat products. They should choose non-meat food sources which are high in protein, iron and vitamin B12.

9 Cost

Cost is a particularly important factor for people with low incomes.

Food prepared at home is often cheaper than eating out or buying take-aways.

A diet high in cereals, fruit and vegetables is also often less expensive.

10 Food availability

Most foods are grown in a particular season of the year, e.g. strawberries are harvested in summer. These are called 'seasonal foods'.

Technology and the importation of food, however, has allowed food to be available all year round.

Frozen foods such as vegetables are a great alternative to fresh, if they are unavailable.

11 Food preference

Not everyone likes the same food, but some foods are particularly popular or unpopular.

The taste, texture or appearance of foods can affect people in different ways.

People should choose a balanced diet with a wide range of foods they enjoy.

12 Social concerns

Human welfare and fair trading, where growers or producers in developing countries are paid a good minimum price to cover their costs, can be a high concern for some people.

Animal welfare can also be a concern for some people. This can affect the choice between caged or free-range hens, or 'dolphin friendly' tuna.

13 Environmental concerns

Scientific intervention in the food chain also causes concerns for some people. Genetically modified (GM) ingredients changing a plant, animal or micro-organism's genes or inserting one from another organism. People may decide to choose non-genetically modified food products.

People may also choose foods labelled as organic. The word 'organic' has come to have the meaning of foods grown without the use of inorganic fertilisers, or pesticides. Food sold as 'organic' must come from growers, processors and importers who are registered and approved by organic certification bodies, which are shown on the food label.

14 Food advertising

Advertisements encouraging people to choose certain foods often appear on the television, internet, radio, posters, magazines and newspapers.

Point of purchase advertising and product placement are strategies often used to provide information to consumers.

15 Sources of information

There are many sources of information to assist people making food choices.

In the UK, the Department of Health and the Food Standards Agency help to increase understanding about what makes a balanced diet.

The use of traffic light labels on the front of the packs is another good source of information. This provides information in the high, medium or low amounts of fat, saturated fat, sugars and salt. The label also tells you how much of each nutrient is in a portion, to make healthier food choices easier.

16 Other sources of information

Supermarkets and food manufacturers, charities and

other groups also produce information on what we should be eating.

The most common source of information for many people, however, is the media, i.e. internet, newspapers, radio, magazines and television programmes.

It is important that advice is clear and consistent so that people are not confused about what good nutrition means.

17 Types of information

Nutrition panel and ingredients lists can provide information on food. Information about the nutrient content of food from a food label can be helpful when planning a balanced diet.

Recipe and cookery ideas, and information about how to use less familiar foods, can make it easier to put healthy dietary advice into practice.