

LEARNING OBJECTIVES



*By the end of
the lesson, you
will be able to:*

- discuss some of the reasons why people eat what they eat;
- understand the reasons behind your own personal food choices;
- select nutritious foods and plan a healthful diet.

Lesson 7

Making good food choices and healthy meals

LESSON OVERVIEW



This lesson is about the careful food choices we need to make to have a healthy, balanced diet. It explores the different reasons we eat what we eat, such as our eating habits, traditions, cost, taste and many others. It highlights the importance of selecting foods according to their nutritional value and our body's needs. The lesson explains how a healthy diet should be balanced and composed of a variety of foods that supply all the nutrients we need. Some examples of dietary guidelines from around the world are provided and learners are encouraged to develop their personal guidelines based on their health and dietary needs.



Part 1

Eating habits and healthy diets



READING

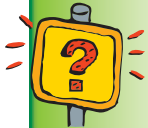
We need to eat to meet our nutritional needs, but people often make their food choices for reasons other than nutrition. The availability of foods and their cost; the taste and appearance of foods; personal food likes and dislikes; convenience; religious and cultural practices and traditions; health and medical conditions; and knowledge about foods and the body's nutritional requirements, all are reasons why people eat the foods that they eat.

Eating habits and traditions are different for every culture. Some cultures eat their main meal in the morning before the work day; for others the main meal is in the middle of the day. Still other cultures eat their main meal at the end of the day. Some societies eat twice a day; others eat three times a day. In some cultures, families eat together, in others adults eat separately from children, or men eat separately from women.

Many cultures and societies have rules or beliefs about specific foods that are not to be eaten ("food taboos"). Some of these apply to the entire population and some apply only to people in certain conditions, such as during pregnancy, breastfeeding, infancy or illness. While many of these practices may contribute to good health, some of them may actually be harmful, as they deprive people of needed nutrients. When foods of important nutritional value are avoided or forbidden for cultural reasons or beliefs, these foods need to be replaced by other, more culturally acceptable foods of similar nutrient content.

No single food contains all of the nutrients we need to be healthy. That is why we need to eat a variety of foods in sufficient amounts. A good diet will include many different foods, preferably consumed over the course of the day, and will be sufficient in quantity and quality to meet an individual's need for food energy (calories) and other nutrients. Without adequate variety in the diet, it is possible to consume the calories we need or more calories than we need and yet still not meet our body's needs for all nutrients or for a particular nutrient. We need to choose foods for meals and snacks that are high in nutrients but that meet the body's need for energy (not too little, not too much). The goal of a good diet is to meet all our energy and other nutrient needs while keeping within our dietary

TO THINK ABOUT WHILE READING



Are you choosing the right foods to eat?

Are you getting what you need from your food?

Do you keep in mind your body's needs when you decide what to eat?

Are there any dietary guidelines in your country that can help you understand which foods to eat more often or less often?



calorie intake needs. Doing so can help lead to normal growth and development in children, better health for people of all ages and decreased risk of a number of chronic diseases that can be major health problems.

There is no one “ideal” diet that is right for everyone. Nutritional needs are specific to each individual, but everyone needs a diet that is balanced and includes a variety of foods that supply the different kinds and amounts of nutrients they need for good health. Balance and variety in the diet means ensuring that we get enough, but not too much, of the energy and nutrients we need. It also means that we avoid excessive amounts of any one food or any food component (nutrient). With careful food selection, we can obtain all the nutrients we need, while enjoying a variety of foods, and still maintain a healthy body weight.

Ideally, a balanced meal is achieved at every mealtime or eating occasion. Balance and variety can also be achieved in combination (meals and snacks combined) and over time (different meals in the course of the day or week). For example, a food or nutrient that may be lacking or in excess in one meal can be made up for or balanced in the next meal or snack. Eating more food (calories) than we need one day, or less than we need, can be balanced by how much or how little we eat the following day. In order to maintain balance and variety, we must understand our nutrient needs and which foods provide them and we should keep this in mind when making our food choices.



For more information on the nutrients in foods, see [Lesson 4 Learning about carbohydrates, protein and fats](#) and [Lesson 5 Learning about Vitamins and Minerals](#).

A healthy, balanced diet can be based on local eating patterns, using locally available foods and respecting local eating customs. The foods in people’s diets around the world are very different from each other, but all good diets must be composed of a variety of different foods that provide all of the food energy and other nutrients in the amounts needed. For most people, a good meal will be based on a starchy carbohydrate food, sometimes referred to as “staple” foods, as they form the basis or main portion of the meal, and a variety of other foods (side dishes) that provide the additional protein, vitamins and minerals needed for a good, healthy diet.

Staple foods are usually starchy carbohydrates such as rice, pasta, breads, couscous, and other foods made from wheat, rice, millet, rye, barley and oats, cassava, maize (corn) or potatoes. These foods contain energy-rich carbohydrates, and in their unrefined form, also contain B vitamins, fibre, smaller amounts of other vitamins, minerals and even a small amount of protein. The kind of starchy foods eaten should be varied as much as possible.

The other foods eaten with the meal should include a wide variety of different kinds of foods, in appropriate amounts, that meet our food energy and



nutrient needs. These should include: generous amounts of vegetables and fruits; good amounts of legumes; smaller amounts of meat, poultry, eggs or fish and milk and milk products, such as cheese and yoghurt. These foods can be prepared in the form of stews, soups, sauces, relishes, toppings or single food servings to accompany the main staple food of the meal. The greater the variety of side dishes served with the staple food, the greater the chance that all the needed nutrients are included in the meal.

While individual nutritional and dietary needs vary with age, sex, health status and activity levels, most general dietary advice for adults recommends:

- **Eating starchy carbohydrates as the basis of most meals.** The starchy carbohydrates – grains, breads, cereals, potatoes - should provide the body's main source of energy from food. These foods also provide some protein, some micronutrients and fibre. Whole unrefined grains and foods made from unrefined grains are especially good; they are a source of nutrients such as iron, magnesium, selenium, B vitamins and fibre. Examples of unrefined grains are: bulgur, millet, oatmeal, quinoa, rolled oats, whole-grain barley, whole rye, whole wheat, and buckwheat. Eating whole grains as a single food (such as brown rice and oatmeal) or as an ingredient in foods may reduce the risk of certain heart diseases.
- **Eating fruits and vegetables as much as possible every day.** Fruits and vegetables are a major source of dietary fibre and essential vitamins and minerals, including folate, magnesium, potassium and vitamins A, C, and K. Including a wide variety of different colours and types of fruits and vegetables is important for providing a variety of the necessary vitamins and minerals in the diet. Eating adequate amounts of fruits and vegetables may help reduce the risk of certain chronic diseases and may help protect against certain types of cancers. Most vegetables are low in calories and fat.
- **Eating legumes regularly.** Legumes, such as dried beans, peas and lentils, are a good source of protein and other important nutrients such as iron, zinc, potassium and folate and dietary fibre. Legumes are low in fat.
- **Eating milk and milk products regularly in small amounts.** Milk, cheeses, yoghurt and other milk products provide protein, fat and many other important nutrients, especially calcium and potassium. People who may need to reduce their fat and calorie intake can select lower-fat varieties which still provide other important nutrients.
- **Eating meat, poultry, eggs and fish regularly in small amounts.** These foods provide protein, fat and other important nutrients, such as iron, the B vitamins and zinc. Eating even small amounts of these foods on a regular basis can help meet the need for protein. Leaner meats or meats with reduced fat can still provide protein and other nutrients, while reducing the amount of fat and calories. Certain fatty fishes, such as salmon, mackerel, herring, trout, sardines, swordfish and tuna, contain essential fatty acids that help reduce the risk of heart disease and have other health benefits.
- **Choosing carefully the types of fats and oils in the diet and using limited amounts.** Fats and oils are high in energy and are important for absorbing



vitamins A, D, E and K. Red palm oil is rich in vitamin A. Fats can be an important source of dietary energy for people with inadequate total energy intake. People who need to reduce their energy intake may need to limit the amount of fat in their diet. Because not all fats are the same, it is important to choose carefully the type of fat, as well as the amount, consumed. Most of the fat in the diet should come from unsaturated fatty acids, especially oils, seeds, nuts and fatty fish that provide omega-3 fatty acids. The amount of saturated fats in the diet should be limited and trans fats and foods containing trans fats (partially hydrogenated oils) should be avoided or eaten as little as possible.

- **Limiting consumption of sugar, sugary foods and beverages.** These foods provide food energy, but few other nutrients; they often have a high fat content. Because they provide additional calories and few essential nutrients, they should be consumed only when nutrient needs have been met and without going beyond daily calorie needs for maintaining a healthy body weight.
- **Consumption of salt.** Salt contains sodium, an essential mineral that helps the body perform many important functions, especially regulating the body's fluid volume. Recent research indicates that the body has mechanisms to ensure sufficient sodium availability for these essential functions. Consuming high amounts of sodium can contribute to high blood pressure (hypertension), a major risk factor for heart disease, stroke and kidney disease, but too low sodium intake can also have very harmful effects. People who are salt-sensitive or who are at-risk of hypertension should limit the amount of salt they consume. Most people can consume moderate amounts of salt in their food.
- **Limiting consumption of alcohol.** Alcohol provides food energy, but does not provide other nutrients. Limiting the amount of alcohol in the diet can help to control the number of calories consumed. Moderate consumption of alcohol may lower the risk of heart disease, but high consumption, over time, can lead to a number of health problems. Alcohol during pregnancy can lead to serious problems in the development of the unborn baby and should be avoided.
- **Maintaining energy balance to keep a healthy body weight.** To be in energy balance and maintain a healthy body weight, the calories consumed from foods must be balanced by the calories used in normal body functions, daily activities and physical activity. Using more energy than is taken in from food can lead, over time, to weight loss and, in some cases, to undernourishment. Taking in more food energy than is used can lead, over time, to weight gain. The best way to maintain a healthy body weight is to balance the amount of calories taken from food with the amount of energy used.



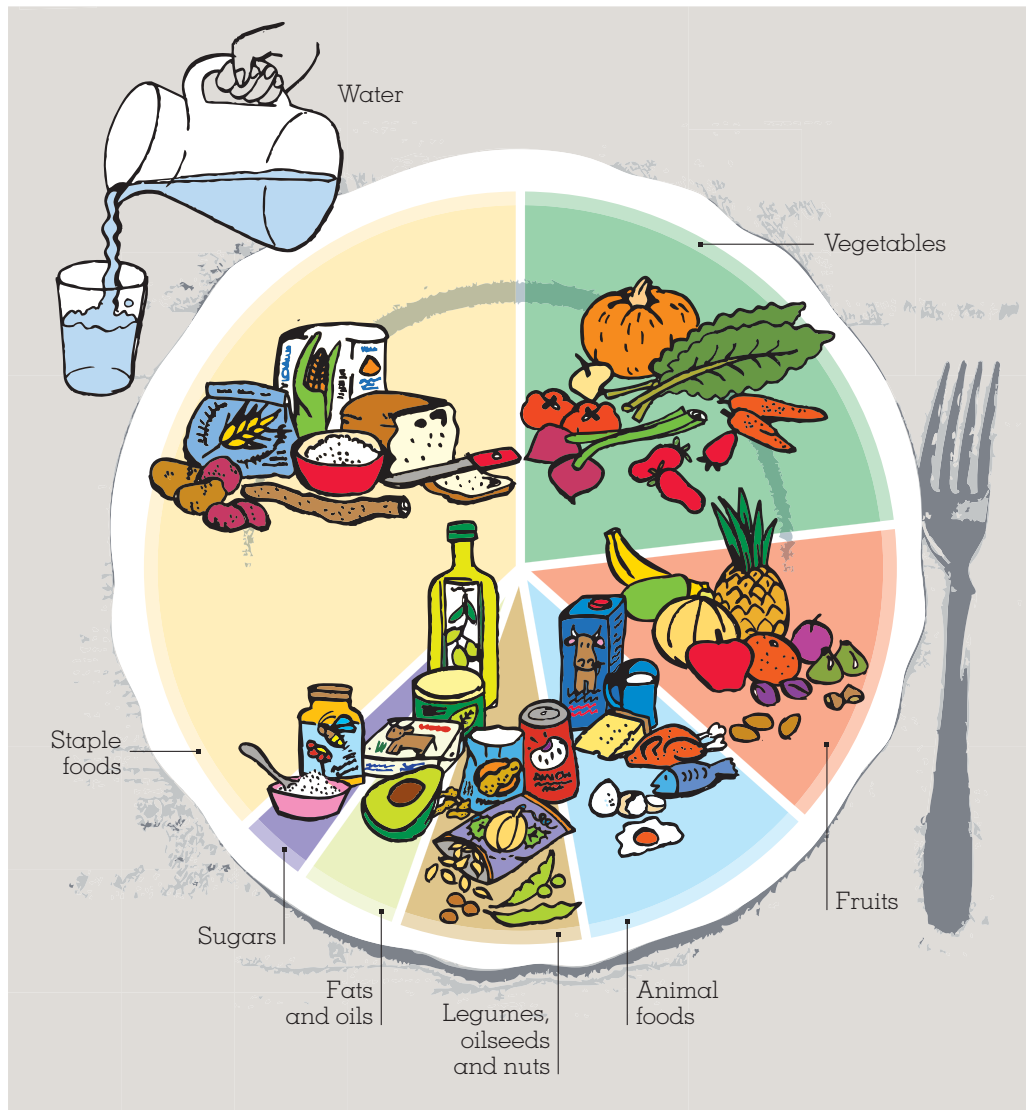
For more information on energy balance, see [Lesson 9](#)
Achieving healthy body size and weight.



- **Drink plenty of water every day.** Water is more important to life than any other nutrient and the body needs more water every day than any other nutrient. The body's water supply needs to be refilled every day.



For more information on nutritional needs at different stages of life, see **Lesson 6** *Meeting nutritional needs throughout life.*



Snack foods eaten in addition to regular meals have an important place in a good diet. Snacks are recommended for people with high needs for food energy and nutrients and for people who may not be able to eat enough food at one time to meet their needs, such as small children or people who are ill. Snacks should consist of nourishing foods that supplement and complement a good diet and should not take the place of foods eaten at meals. People who meet most of their food energy requirements from their main meals may need to be careful in their snacking so that they do not exceed their energy needs.










To help people choose good diets based on locally available foods, cultural practices and local health concerns, many countries have developed food guides for their populations, called “Food-based dietary guidelines” (FBDG). These food guides vary in degree of detail and in specific recommendations. Most dietary guidelines group foods into categories of major nutrient content and they usually indicate which foods or groups of foods to eat more often or less often. Some guidelines include a recommended number of servings of foods from the different food groups and portion sizes, while others provide only very general recommendations. In this way, these guidelines provide practical dietary suggestions for people to use to help them develop good diets and eating patterns that meet their health and nutritional needs.

While most food-based dietary guidelines are for the general population, some countries have specific guidelines for different groups, such as children, pregnant women, overweight or obese people and the elderly. Many countries also include recommendations on physical activity and food safety in their guidelines.




MATERIALS

-  Ask yourself work sheet *My food choices*
-  Work sheet *Why do people eat the foods they eat?*
-  Fact sheet *Food-based dietary guidelines*
-  Ask yourself work sheet *Analysing dietary guidelines*
-  Work sheet *My food guide for better health*
-  Work sheet *Mixed meal model*
-  Work sheet *Eating traditions around the world*




ACTIVITIES

My food choices

-  Answer the questions on the Ask yourself work sheet *My food choices* to see if you are careful about your food choices.

Why do people eat the foods they eat?

-  Using the work sheet *Why do people eat the foods they eat?*, make a list of the reasons you think most people select the foods they eat. Include as many reasons as you can think of. How many reasons did you come up with?



Compare your list to what some people say about their food choices.
(See quotes in the speech bubbles).

- Are all of the reasons related to health? Why or why not?
- What do people's food choices depend on? Cost? Availability of food? Taste? Habit? Time and convenience? Culture and religion?

Use the second page of the work sheet to group the reasons into categories.

Analysing dietary guidelines



Download the *Food-based dietary guidelines* fact sheet or check the guidelines here: www.fao.org/ag/humannutrition/nutritioneducation/fbdg/en/

Study and compare the guidelines from each of these regions:

- Africa
- Asia and the Pacific
- Europe
- Latin America and the Caribbean
- Near East
- North America.



Use the *Ask yourself work sheet* to analyse the dietary guidelines and to check your understanding of the recommendations for healthy eating.

My food guide for better health



Using the information from the previous activity and the knowledge you've gained from the previous lessons, create your own food guidelines. A Work sheet *My food guide for better health* is provided to help you develop your personal food guide. Your guide should meet your individual needs and take into consideration your current health and nutritional status and eating habits.

Mixed meal model



Use the *Mixed meal model* to plan your main meal of the day according to your needs. Keep in mind that to get enough energy and nutrients, we should eat a mixture of foods. A good meal is a combination of different foods containing carbohydrates, protein, fats, vitamins and minerals. The main portion of the meal should include energy-rich starchy carbohydrates such as rice, wheat, cassava, maize or potatoes. The side dishes should be made from meat, fish, poultry, cheese, legumes, vegetables and fruits.

Write or draw the ingredients of your mixed meal in the corresponding sections of the plate model and answer the work sheet questions to analyse your meal.



Eating traditions around the world

The way people eat differs from culture to culture. Using the Internet, local libraries, experts, other sources available to you, or your own experience, see what you know or can learn about eating habits and traditions in different countries, regions and societies.



Use the Work sheet *Eating traditions around the world* to fill in the gaps in the sentences on how people eat around the world.



KEY POINTS

Review these three key points
to remember about careful
food choices and healthful eating habits.
Check your understanding and see
how you can apply it to your own life.

Healthful eating habits

- Meeting our body's nutritional needs should be an important reason for our food choices.
- A healthy diet:
 - includes a variety of foods from different food groups
 - meets the individual needs for calories and nutrients
 - is safe - no risk from toxins, mould or chemicals
 - is enjoyable and culturally acceptable
 - is available and sufficient each day and all year round.
- With careful food selection, a person can obtain all the nutrients they need while enjoying a variety of foods and still maintain a healthy body weight.



Part 2

Shopping for good foods



READING

The purpose of learning about the food groups, the nutrients in food and individual dietary needs is to be able to serve good family meals that meet the food and nutrition needs of every member of the family. Serving good family meals also requires knowing where and how to shop for good foods at good prices, how to make the best food selections, how to plan good nutritious meals and how to store, prepare and cook foods to get the best nutritional value from them. Food must be selected carefully to get the best value for the family budget in terms of nutrients and dietary variety; food has to be stored properly to prevent contamination from harmful germs, chemicals and pests; it also has to be prepared and cooked properly to avoid destroying nutrients in cooking.

Making good meals begins with good planning and good food shopping. When selecting foods to buy in the food store or market, it is important to keep in mind the need to select a wide variety of foods that will meet the nutritional needs of all members of the family.

When deciding what foods to include in the shopping basket, it is helpful to:

- Plan meals in advance.
- Remember what foods and meals have been eaten in the last few days and try to avoid buying the same foods.
- Check what foods there already are at home to avoid waste and repetition.
- Buy only what is needed to avoid waste and spoilage.
- Keep in mind recommendations for variety, quantity and portions:
 - Buy some foods from all of the food groups.
 - Vary the foods selected within each food group.
 - Buy small amounts of foods that should make up only a small amount of the diet (sugar, sweets, fats and oils).
 - For important foods that may be expensive, such as meats, fish, milk and milk products and certain fruits and vegetables, include them in the shopping but buy smaller amounts and when possible, substitute with less expensive similar foods from the same group (for example, dried beans or other legumes instead of meat for protein; choose vegetables and fruits in season).
 - Buy according to the nutritional needs of the family.

TO THINK ABOUT WHILE READING



Do you plan your meals in advance?

How do you decide what foods to buy?

Do you know where to buy good foods at good prices?

Do you check and compare the food labels when buying packaged foods?



When buying grain products:

- Select a variety of grains, breads and cereals, especially whole unrefined grains.
- Choose pastries, cookies and other sweets less often, as special treats.

When buying vegetables and fruits:

- Choose a variety of red, orange or dark green vegetables and fruit; they usually contain more nutrients than those with lighter colours.
- For best flavour and price, purchase fresh fruits and vegetables in season.
- Buy only what can be eaten or preserved in the next few days; fruits and vegetables lose nutrients and flavour when they wilt or spoil.
- Choose frozen vegetables as a convenient alternative to fresh; they can be just as nutritious, they keep well and reduce the amount of preparation time. Canned vegetables are also good, but may have higher amounts of salt.
- Substitute frozen or canned fruit when fresh fruit is not available or is too expensive (but check for added sugars).
- Choose whole fruit over fruit juices (whole fruit has more fibre) and fruit juices instead of fruit drinks. Fruit drinks may have added sugars and only a small amount of fruit juice.

When buying milk and milk products:

- Include a variety of milk products, such as cheeses and yoghurts, in addition to milk.
- Look for lower-fat varieties.

When buying meat and alternatives:

- Include a variety of red and white meats and poultry.
- Select leaner meats or meats with reduced fat.
- Include a variety of fish and seafood (fresh, tinned or frozen).
- Buy beans, peas and lentils, canned or dried; they are an inexpensive source of protein, are low in fat and high in fibre.
- Include some nuts and seeds as a good source of protein.

The food label on packaged foods can be a useful source of information for food selection and buying. Most countries have laws regulating the information that must be provided on the label of a packaged or processed food. This information might include the name of the food, the amount of food in the package, an ingredient list, and some identifying information on the processing date, expiry date or “best by” date, batch numbers and location of the manufacturer. Additional information may include serving size, number of servings in the package and nutritional information. Some countries also regulate the nutritional or health claims that are allowed on the packaging. For example, in some countries nutritional claims that the product is “low fat” or “low sodium” must meet approved definitions. Health claims on food labels, such as “lowers cholesterol” or “lowers blood pressure” may also be regulated. Many countries



restrict health claims to those that have scientific basis and have been approved by the regulatory agencies. Comparing the nutrient content and serving size of different products, if available, can help in selecting higher quality foods or making choices for special or restricted diets.



MATERIALS



Match it work sheet *Food shopping and meal planning*



Quiz work sheet *Food choices: true or false?*



Work sheet *My seasonal fruits*



Work sheet *My seasonal vegetables*



Work sheet *Reading food labels*



Fact sheet *Understanding and using food labels*



ACTIVITIES

Food shopping and meal planning



Go to the Match it work sheet and see if you can match the beginning of each sentence with its correct ending.

Food choices: true or false?



Take a quick quiz to check your understanding of the best foods to choose, buy and eat.

My seasonal fruit and vegetables

Make a list of the fruits and vegetables available in local markets and shops, or that you and your family grow. Find out when each fruit and vegetable is ripe and ready for harvest and sale in your area and where it comes from. When does the season begin? When does it end? When is the peak of the season? How do prices change throughout the season? Does the quality or flavour change?



Fill in the Work sheets *My seasonal fruits* and *My seasonal vegetables*, using the provided symbols or create your own.

You can carry the completed work sheets with you to the shop or the market to use as a pocket guide when choosing your fruit and vegetables.



Reading food labels

Collect labels of three packaged foods of the same type: for example, three different breads, three yogurts, three cereals, three canned products, three juices, etc. Read the labels attentively and try to get as much information about these foods as you can. Fill in the *Reading food labels* work sheet and compare the products. Which one is a better choice for you?

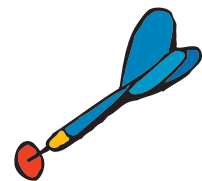


KEY POINTS

Review these three key points to remember about selecting good foods to buy. Check your understanding of them and see how you can apply it to your own life.

Shopping for food

- Good planning and careful food shopping will help us prepare healthy meals and get the best nutritional value for the price.
- When deciding what foods to buy, it is important to plan meals in advance, avoid repetition, waste and spoilage, keep in mind seasonality and follow recommendations for variety, quality and amounts.
- The labels on packaged foods provide information which can help in selecting the foods which best meet our nutritional and dietary needs.



My food choices

Are you making good personal food choices? Ask yourself the following questions about your last meal or snack and evaluate your food choices.

1. When did you eat your meal or snack?
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2. Why did you eat at that particular time?
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3. What foods did you eat?
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.....
.....
4. Why did you select those particular foods to eat?
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.....
5. Is that the reason why you usually eat what you eat, or do you have other reasons for making your food choices? If so, list the other reasons you eat the foods you eat. What do you think about when choosing foods to eat? (The taste? If it is good for you? If you will have enough of it? If you are eating the same foods often?)
.....
.....
.....
6. How much do you think about the nutritional value of foods when you are making your food choices?
.....
.....
7. Are there any food habits or taboos that cause you to avoid eating certain nutritious foods? What are they?
.....
8. What suggestions can you give to replace nutritious foods that you avoid with other foods of similar nutritional value?
.....
.....





Why do people eat the foods they eat?

What do people's food choices depend on?
Make a list of all the reasons why people choose the foods they eat.
Write down as many reasons as you can think of.
Then group the reasons into the categories on the second page of the work sheet.

List the reasons here:

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Some examples for you...

- Our religion does not allow us to eat certain foods.
- I am allergic to some foods.
- I eat snacks when I am bored or feel lonely...
- We have traditional foods that we always eat.
- I look for special offers and foods on sale.
- I have a busy schedule, so I need to eat quickly.
- I am a vegetarian. I don't eat meat.
- I choose foods that help keep my weight down.
- I buy foods that are available in the shops in my neighbourhood.
- We eat what we can grow, hunt and catch.
- I am trying to eat healthily.



Now group the reasons into the following categories:

Health

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-
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Habit

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Cost

-
-
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Time and convenience

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Availability of food

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Culture and religion

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Taste

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-
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Other reasons

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