

SECTION 4: CHOICES IN FOOD CONSUMPTION

4A: SYNOPSIS

The majority of the world's population have little choice about food selection beyond the need to provide subsistence nutrients from available crops. In industrialised societies we are faced with a bewildering array of choices from agricultural production, processing and marketing of foods, more often driven by profit than by nutritional benefit. Papers in this section review changes in food consumption patterns and provide information from nutritional science on which choices for good health can be made.

Mother's milk, money and markets

Breast-feeding provides complete nutritional requirements for the first few months of infancy, is free of risk from microbial infection and confers significant health benefits for the growing child. Julie Smith outlines some of these benefits and describes how they have been undermined by changing cultural practices and by commercial pressures which promote artificial formula diets, both in industrialised and developing countries.

Who's driving the food supply?

Rosemary Stanton provides a robust defence of common sense in favour of the selection of fresh fruit and vegetables, unrefined cereal products, lean meat and fish, over fad diets, pre-packaged foods and dietary supplements. She argues strongly for public education in making choices in the selection and preparation of foodstuffs. These should be driven more by healthy and ecologically sustainable principles than by commercial pressures.

Safety and labelling of genetically modified (GM) foods

Crops have been selected for food yield over the millennia since the beginning of the agricultural transition. Humans have accelerated this process by introducing GM crops. Public doubts about this process include health, environmental and ethical concerns, fear of multinational companies gaining control of the food supply and the lack of discernable benefits to consumers. Michael Dack reviews some of the pros and cons of GM foods and describes the role of the public regulator in releasing and marketing these foods.

Do current Australian recommendations on healthy eating need a re-think?

Current recommendations on healthy eating embodied in the Nutrition Australia Food Pyramid are designed to limit the intake of fats and sweets. Low fat foods are promoted, composed mostly of cereal carbohydrates with a high glycaemic (sugar-releasing) index. This may have contributed to our current pandemic of obesity and type 2 diabetes. Michael Djordjevic argues that more promotion of fruit and vegetables, which are richer in nutrients and have a lower glycaemic index, could improve our health towards that of Mediterranean countries, which have a lower incidence of heart disease and diabetes.

Food marketing in the 21st century: building the consumer-marketer connection

The advent of new communications and food production technologies, together with increasing living standards, active and information-hungry consumers and changing lifestyles will see changes in food marketing and in relationships between consumers, food marketers and the environment. Mike Reid discusses how the sometimes conflicting interests of the food industry, shareholders and consumers might be resolved.

Changing patterns of eating

What we eat, when we eat, where we eat and with whom we eat has changed markedly in Australia over the last two decades. Karen Cashel discusses the moves away from small local shops to supermarkets, from self-prepared to pre-packaged meals and from eating at home to dining out. She describes changes in the proportion and varieties of foodstuffs and alcoholic beverages consumed. Some of these changes make for more enjoyable and sociable eating, but decline in food literacy and preparation skills are deplored.

The food/exercise balance

Louise Burke, Michelle Minehan, Gregory Cox and Andrea Braakhuis use their experience with training elite athletes to illustrate the interesting relationships between food and exercise, with some people “eating to exercise” and others “exercising to eat”. Nutritional requirements for different types of training are described and the important principles of balance between exercise and food is emphasised, applicable to both athletes and non-athletes aiming to achieve sustainable health and fitness.