

Food, Nutrition and Society: Old and New Concepts

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Food is a basic need, which since the most primitive societies has always influenced the way of life of humans. Today, however, it is the individual's lifestyle, which significantly influences the eating habits. For this reason, food now has acquired specific new connotations: it is no longer simply a source of nourishment but often results as an instrument for achieving specific goals. In a context characterized by abundance, people feel the urge to satisfy everything they perceive as a need. As a consequence, the approach towards food becomes much more complex as food must satisfy different types of objectives.

The symbolic and ritual value of a food product is the result of the context in which an individual lives. However, from an economic and social perspective we can observe how access to a food product is determined not only by the availability of the product but also by each individual's economic resources.

Furthermore, the concept of food safety must never be forgotten. In fact, in order to prevent any health risks and ensure the safety and quality of all food consumed every day at our tables, there must be routine inspections by competent entities so as to control the procedures in the production, processing, storage, and distribution of the food products. The requirement of safety of a food product affects the entire production chain starting from the geographical origin of the product up to each single element of the environment and of techniques involved in the industrial processing.

Whenever dealing with a population that is characterized by a high risk of under-nutrition, it is clear that along with food safety, which studies only the risks deriving from infections, food poisoning and chemical contamination (of plant and animal origin), it is important to take into consideration also food security, which refers to the methods necessary to guarantee a correct coverage of all of the population's nutritional needs. The priority becomes to provide the necessary food to sufficiently and correctly nourish all the individuals in that community.

Currently, the world demonstrates a deep social and geographical division, in which there are areas characterized by two very different scenarios. In some areas, food is still a primary need and constitutes mostly a necessity for survival. In other areas of the world, on the other hand, food is present in large amounts and the individual is faced with the difficulty of choosing amongst multiple choices and excessive amounts of food. In both contexts, the choices regarding food are dictated not only by each individual's economic and social opportunities but also are strongly influenced by cultural, educational and emotional factors.

In a context characterized by wealth and abundance, nutritional problems are mostly due to incorrect nutritional choices that often determine nutritional imbalances. An individual's choice as regards to nutrition is not always the consequence of a conscious and nutritionally correct decision. Often people choose to prefer certain foods based on personal taste while systematically excluding other foods, which would instead be essential for their health and wellbeing.

Even when food is present for everyone in large amounts, the value that each person attributes to food varies. In fact, food no longer represents a simple necessity for survival but becomes a personal choice that is influenced by multiple variables. Food can in fact easily become an instrument for emotional comfort, losing its interpretation as nourishment and sustenance but taking on a greater symbolic

meaning. In other cases, food can become a mean for achieving certain personal goals or visions. In these cases, an individual can often completely exclude certain foods from their nutritional plan in order to achieve the desired goal.

The presence of erroneous interpretations of food or of specific food products can bring to incorrect food choices and to a nutritionally unbalanced situation. It becomes, therefore, necessary to put in place corrective actions with the aim of obtaining a correct understanding of food. In fact, food has an important emotional and symbolic value but at the same time should always be recognized its essential role in promoting health and wellbeing.

There is an important difference between eating and nourishing. Eating for humans is the voluntary choice of foods and is influenced by social, psychological, cultural and personal factors. On the other hand, nourishing means providing all the correct quantities of macronutrients and micronutrients the body needs to ensure a state of wellbeing. Therefore, nourishing can be considered a process that is physiological, involuntary and necessary in order to assure through food the intake of daily individual needs. Since no food is nutritionally complete, in all those cases in which there is no presence of food allergy or intolerance, the recommendation should be to vary food as much as possible, giving preference to foods of quality and that are locally in season.

In a society in which the fast pace of work-life greatly influences the lives of individuals and of their families, it becomes necessary to campaign for the promotion of correct eating behaviours and of an understanding of the importance of food, including the way and time in which it is consumed. Many wrong food choices are dictated by rush, fatigue and the under-estimation of the importance of food. Meals should be well distributed throughout the day in order to provide the right amount and form of nutrients. It is necessary to recommend that meals should not be skipped, but should be enjoyed during a break from work as a peaceful moment to share with colleagues or family and in which to enjoy the taste and the pleasure of food.

Correct nutrition requires a sufficient level of nutritional education, without ignoring the pleasure of food and of eating. Therefore, starting from early childhood it is important to find time to establish healthy habits and to build the foundation of a healthy diet and lifestyle.

In conclusion, the goal for every individual should be to eat a well balanced diet so as to prevent disease, enhance psychological and physical well-being and to protect and increase their current and future state of health.

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