Unit 1 Dietary Trends and Nutrition
Lesson 1: You Are What You Eat

In order to educate others about proper nutrition it is helpful to understand the basics terms and concepts related to diet (which has alternate meanings) and nutrition.

Defining Diet and Nutrition

Whether educating one or others about dietary trends and nutrition defining terms is a key component to successfully understanding concepts and practical application of nutritional principles. According to Schlenker & Long "It is important for health professionals working in nutrition to understand the terms that describe the body of knowledge related to dietary trends and nutrition" (2007, page 8, ¶5).

In our Unit 1 Key Concepts, diet is defined as a plan, eating habits, pattern of eating, nutritional regime, or food intake. However, due to a number of social and behavioral factors, the word ‘diet’ in contemporary terms may have a negative connotation. To ‘diet’ often triggers an image of restricted caloric intake, a struggle with the challenge to address issues of overweight or obesity and to follow a strict regime to produce weight loss. In this lesson, diet is used to indicate the definition provided in the Unit 1 Key Concepts.

Schlenker & Long define “The term nutrition” as “…to nourish” (2008, page 8, ¶4) and a “Working Definition of nutrition as the food people eat and how it nourishes their bodies…” (2008, page 8, ¶5)

Nutrition is both science and art focused on how food “…supports optimum growth and maturation, mental and physical well-being, and resistance to disease” (page 8, ¶5).

A positive picture of ‘diet’ is to expand the definition to include a pattern of eating designed to optimize individual health. Or, a nutritional regime based on food choices designed “…to benefit one’s health in proportion to the freedom of those choices” (Whitney and Rolfes, 2002, page 2, ¶1).

The Role of Diet and Nutrition

Benson and Stuart (1992) describe the act of taking in nourishment as a highly complex process. Nourishment is more than “…just nutrient intake” because “While some people live to eat and a few eat to live, most of us view foods…” and the choices we make about foods as strongly influenced by a variety of social, psychological and biological factors. Therefore, diet and nutrition are behavioral psychological and physiological in nature.

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2 Ibid
3 Ibid
4 Ibid
7 Ibid.
Whitney and Rolfes stress the importance of the role of nutrition in one’s life, “…even from before your birth, although you may not always have been aware of it and will continue to affect you in major ways depending on the foods you select” (2002, page 2, ¶1).

This means that each of us, on a daily basis make food choices which, over time, “…may benefit or harm your health…” (Whitney & Rolfes, 2002, page 2, ¶1). This means individual health status is a result of eating habits over time or ‘you are what you eat.’ If we are concerned that our current dietary and nutritional health is less than optimum, then eating habits, including food choices must change. This means becoming nutritionally aware of the role diet and nutrition play in health outcomes.

This also means becoming aware of the myriad of influences on contemporary food choices. This includes examining the role of the food industry in diet and nutrition.

Role of the US Food Industry
In our Unit 1 Key Concepts, the ‘Food Industry’ is defined as companies that produce, process, manufacture, sell, distribute and serve foods, beverages, and dietary supplements.

According to Nestle, ”That diet affects health is beyond question” however ”The overly abundant food supply, combined with a society so affluent that most people can afford to buy more food than they need, sets the stage for competition” (2007, page 1, ¶2). The result is a competition for consumer food dollars in order to maintain corporate profits which in turn satisfy stockholders.

The food industry accomplishes its financial goals through the mechanism of advertising and public relations efforts designed to influence Americans to “eat more...of their products” (Nestle, 2007, page 1, ¶1).

Thus, according to Marion Nestle, the role of the US food industry emerges as one of marketing and political processes designed to promote their products as ‘healthy’ and directly influence what people eat through food choices and eating habits.

Eating Patterns and Habits of Americans
To answer the questions, “What do Americans eat? How do they make their food selections?” (Frank, 2008) the Food Marketing Institute and Prevention magazine conducted a telephone interview survey about families’ food practices and eating habits with 1,000 families” (Frank, 2008). Results from this survey revealed interesting facts about “…the eating habits of American families” as show by the survey results

1. Of shoppers, 45% say they have changed a food-buying decision in the last month because they read the food label.

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9 Ibid.
2. Nearly 50% agree that they are concerned about fat but uncertain how to cut back on fat.
3. Of the respondents, 26% have high-fat diets (e.g., hamburger, bacon, chicken with skin, or eggs) at least 1 time a day; an additional 7% have them 15 times or more a week.
4. African Americans are much more likely than whites to consume high fat meats; 60% have unhealthy eating patterns compared with 29% of whites.
5. Of the respondents, 60% report that a major change occurred in their eating habits during the past 10 years due to health.
6. Changes in eating patterns are more common among women over 40 years old and among more affluent consumers.
7. The most common changes are lowering fat (63%) and increasing fruit and vegetable intake (30%).
8. Overweight shoppers have particular concerns about obesity, high cholesterol, and hypertension.
9. African Americans are more motivated than whites to change food patterns due to high blood pressure rather than to heart disease.
10. Only 20% of respondents believe their eating pattern is healthy, and only 7% consider it as healthy as possible.
11. Of the respondents, 69% are overweight (i.e. over their recommended weight using Metropolitan Life Insurance Company tables). Of 18- to 39-year olds, 57% are overweight, and of respondents 40 years and older, 79% are overweight.
12. Over one third of those who are heavy believe they are within the proper weight range.
13. Of the respondents, 43% report regular, strenuous exercise; fewer than 1 in 10 spent time in the hospital the prior year (Frank, 2008, pp. 56-57, ¶2).¹⁴

According to the reading in Williams’ diet and nutrition are influenced by behavioral, psychological and physiological needs. In addition, the act of eating or ingestion is the process of consuming nutrients for the purpose of providing energy, growth and extension of life. All of us must eat or consume nutrients in order to survive.

Ingestion of nutrients is a reoccurring event over time or a pattern of events repeated over time in a predictable manner. Individual eating patterns are influence by a number of variables such “…as social setting and occasion, by emotions as different as elation and grief, by pleasurable sensations and tastes, individual likes and dislikes, and by cultural heritage and the customs we have grown up with” (Benson & Stuart, 1992, page 130, ¶1,).¹⁵ Eating can be influenced by stress, meaning food can be used as a way of coping with stress and over time can be a habitual way of using food that carries over into nonfood aspects of our lives” (page 130, ¶2,).¹⁶

¹⁶ Ibid.
According to Whitney & Rolfes, “People decide what to eat, when to eat, and even whether to eat in highly personal ways, often based on social motives rather than awareness of nutrition’s importance to health (2002, page 2, ¶1)."  

These authors list the following factors as influences on food choices, eating patterns and habits of Americans:

- Personal Preference
- Habit
- Ethnic Heritage or Tradition
- Social Interactions
- Availability, Convenience, and Economy
- Positive and negative Associations
- Emotional Comfort
- Values
- Body Weight and Image
- Nutrition

(2002, pages 2-4)

Each of these factors may operate alone or in combination to influence food choices. According to Whitney & Rolfes this means,

A person selects foods for a variety of reasons. Whatever the reasons may be, food choices influence health. Individual food selections neither make nor break a diet’s healthfulness, but the balance of foods selected over time can make an important difference to health. For this reason, people are wise to think “nutrition” when making food choices (2002, page 7).

According to Yunsheng, Bertone, Stanek et al (2003), “Changes in dietary habits and physical activity have been implicated as potential causes of obesity.” Research studies indicate that eating habits of Americans have changed due to “...characteristics of dietary behavior such as eating frequency, the temporal distribution of eating events across the day, breakfast skipping, and the frequency of meals eaten away from home, together referred to as "eating patterns...”

According to Food USA, “Convenience remains the driving force behind consumer purchasing decisions, despite the increased emphasis placed on health in the past year, according to the latest Eating Patterns in America report” (2006).

**Nationwide Food Consumption**

18 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
An article in the Nutrition Action Healthletter, April 1999 The Changing American Diet - statistics on food consumption - Brief Article "Since 1910, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has kept track of how much meat, potatoes, milk, sugar, and other foods leave the nation's warehouses each year.” The report 'grades' the use of sweeteners, meat, poultry and fish, beverages, eggs, fruits and vegetables, four, grains, and beans, milk, dairy products, added fats and oils by Americans. Americas’ nutrition “Report Card” in 1999 demonstrated the following:

- SWEETENERS: F
- MEAT, POULTRY, & FISH: C+
- BEVERAGES: F
- EGGS: B
- FRUITS & VEGETABLES: A-
- FLOUR, GRAINS, & BEANS: B-
- ADDED FATS & OILS: C+
- MILK: B+
- DAIRY PRODUCTS: D+
(Nutrition Action Healthletter, 1999)

According to Benson and Stuart in 1992, the American diet was not healthy. "The American diet, and Western diets in general, are related to a fast-paced, high-stress lifestyle” resulting in the ‘...fast-food phenomenon...” (page 132, ¶2) which is no accident but by design to suit the American lifestyle. The authors stated “The typical American diet is high in fat and sodium but low in fiber” (page 132, ¶2). Benson and Stuart further explain how Americans “...rarely sit down for an extended, relaxed midday meal, but instead try to satisfy our hunger in a few minutes” (page 132, ¶3) using fast-food.

According to the USDA Economic Research Service, 2003 article Fast-food Consumption Among US Adults and Children: Dietary and Nutrient Intake Profile, quoting the Journal of American Dietary Association, "Fast-food is a growing component of the American diet, and the frequency of fast-food use has increased dramatically since the early 1970s.”

The same article points out

The number of fast-food outlets increased from about 30,000 in 1970 to 140,000 in 1980, and fast-food sales increased by 300%. (1) More recent estimates show that in 2001, there were about 222,000 fast-food locations in the United States, generating sales of more than $125 billion. The number is projected to increase by 4.1% in 2002, with estimated sales of $130.1 billion. (2) The same report also indicated that three of 10 consumers agreed that meals at a restaurant or fast-food establishment are essential to the way they live... (USDA, 2003).

In summary, this article demonstrates how clearly fast-food has become an important part of the American pattern of food consumption for nearly 40 years and will continue to increase over time if Americans do not change their eating habits and patterns.

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24 Ibid.
Need for Change in American Eating Habits

According to Nestle, "...many scientists in government and in the private sector had become convinced by 1990 that the preponderance of evidence supported recommendations for dietary restrictions" (2007, page 50, ¶1).26

However, the need for change in American eating habits has been confounded by the "conflict between more recent ideas about diets that promote health and the interests of the food industry" (Nestle, 2007, page 31 ¶2).27 Consumers encounter confusion about nutrition because of the competing interests of the USDA and the food industry. This is a direct result of the food industry’s influence on the "...advice issued by the [US] government" because that advice "...has never been based purely on considerations of public health" (page 32, ¶1).28

Benson and Stuart introduce an important factor in the need for change in American eating habits ~ that of obesity.

The prevalence of obesity in the United States has increased substantially in the last two decades, particularly relative to other countries. National surveys in the United States confirm that increases in prevalence of overweight and obesity have occurred within a short period of time. The most recent data derived from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System show that 19.8 percent of US adults are obese, defined as having a body mass index (weight (kg)/height (m)²) equal to or greater than 30 kg/m², which percentage reflects a 61 percent increase since 1991. Obesity, in turn, is a precursor to several major health problems, including, but not limited to, diabetes mellitus, coronary heart disease, and sleep-breathing disorders (2003).29

An article by WebMD, Top 10 Food Trends for 2008 discusses a projected change in the American nationwide food consumption. "According to the experts, 2008 might be called the year of ethical eating. Consumers are looking for more locally grown foods that support a healthier environment and a healthier lifestyle."30

Gail C. Frank, in Community Nutrition: Applying Epidemiology to Contemporary Practice states,

The USDA recommends eating patterns that are high in fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and nonfat or low-fat milk products (consistent with recommended nutrient intakes and reducing the risk of chronic disease), and that are low in saturated fat, cholesterol, added sugars, trans fat, and sodium (2008, page 47, ¶2).31

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27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
The University of California at Berkeley Wellness Encyclopedia of Food and Nutrition points out "Many Americans are aware than making some changes in their diet would benefit their health...” (1992, Chapter 1, page 11, ¶1).\(^{32}\)

On the other hand, Nestle points out how "People become overweight when they take in more calories than needed for daily activities. Although some people can lose weight through exercise alone, most must attend to both sides of the equation – calories eaten as well as calories expended—and must eat less” (2007, pages 75-76).\(^{33}\) She points out how the U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans infers that eating ‘sensibly’ leads consumers to healthy eating habits and information about eating less is provided in the ‘fine print’ related to sensible portion sizes (2007, page 76).\(^{34}\)

**Personal Assessment of Food Patterns**

"If we truly are what we eat, what do your eating habits say about you?” (BBC America, 2008).\(^{35}\)

*Williams’ Essentials of Nutrition and Diet Therapy* discusses the role of personal perceptions of food. Each of us develops ways of eating based on our ethnic background, cultural or religious beliefs, family habits, socioeconomic status, health status, geographical locations, and personal likes and dislikes” (2008, Part I, page 24, ¶4).\(^{36}\)

As you complete Lesson 1, think back over the yesterday and your daily food consumption. What meals and snacks did you eat? How often did you eat? How much did you eat? Did you eat because you were hungry? If not, why did you eat? “Is your fridge stocked full of fresh fruits, vegetables and lean meats OR is it full of fat-filled, overly salted processed convenience foods and abandoned take-out containers?” (BBC America, 2008).\(^{37}\)

The answers to these questions as well as using information from Gillian’s Health Quiz can provide you with an assessment of your own nutrient intake as well as reasons for eating, the type of foods consumed and the impact on your overall nutritional health. The insights gained from this type of self-assessment can be used by nutrition professionals for incorporation into a person-centered approach to individual health and diet issues.


\(^{34}\) Ibid.


\(^{37}\) Ibid.