

What makes you choose the food you eat?

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Abstract

Have you ever thought about why you eat what you eat? Is it because it's tasty? Healthy? Trendy? There are many factors that influence what an adolescent eats. But health is not always the most important one. We wanted to better understand these factors. So we did a scientific review of surveys and studies to see what adolescents eat worldwide. We also explored how economic status and food environment affect food choices. We learned that many adolescents

value food as a way to express their individuality. It also gives them a sense of belonging with their peers. We also discovered that limited access to healthy food is a problem in many areas. So are advertisements promoting unhealthy food. That is why countries all over the world need nutrition programs that make healthy food more available, affordable, and appealing to adolescents.

Introduction

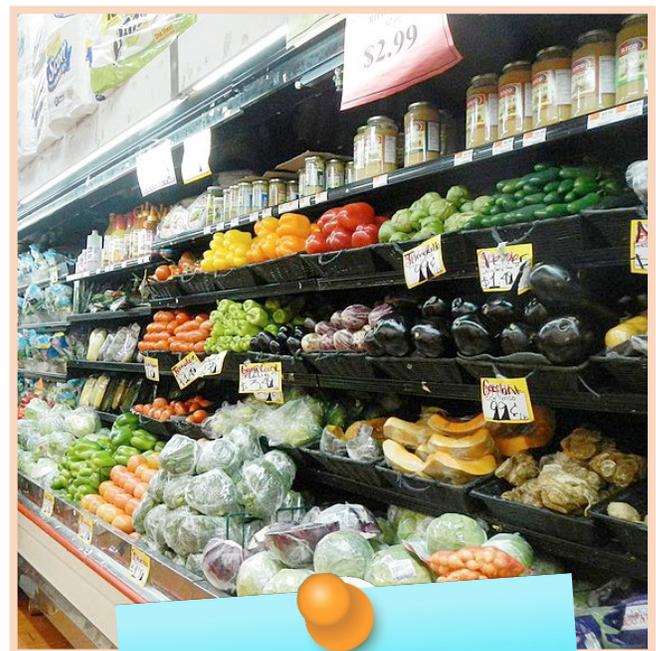
Adolescence is a transformative time. Not only does the body grow and develop, but children gain more control over their choices. And the food habits we develop as adolescents often continue. So, they can influence our health and food choices as adults.

A **food environment** is where we make decisions about getting, preparing, and eating food. **Food availability, price, and convenience all impact our choices.** Cultural, political, and economic systems determine an area's food environment. An adolescent can experience many food environments – at home, at school, and at work.

We wanted to provide information to help the world improve the diets of adolescents. That's why we used existing scientific research to answer two new questions:

- What do adolescents eat around the world?
- What factors influence these food choices?

We then used our analysis to suggest how society can support adolescents to make better food choices.



The food a person buys depends on food availability, price, and convenience.

Source: [Wikicommons](#)

Methods

Question 1: Patterns in adolescent eating

We explored three data sources:

- Large surveys of what adolescents eat in China, Mexico, and India over time.
- The Global School-based Student Health Surveys (GSHS) from 72 countries.
- A review of scientific and **gray literature** about dietary intake. This included information from 249 countries and territories from 2010 to 2020.

Question 2: Factors that affect food choice

We pooled and analyzed data from eleven scientific studies. These studies interviewed adolescents and adults from eight countries. They asked them:

- what factors influence their food choices, and
- what other things motivate them.

We classified our findings based on the food environment: traditional, mixed, and modern.

Results

1. Patterns in adolescent eating

We learned that **economic status influences what adolescents eat**. Adolescents with more money eat more nutrient-rich foods. These foods include fruits, vegetables, dairy, meat and eggs. They also consume nutrient-poor foods like sugar-sweetened beverages, fried foods, and sweets. Adolescents with less money eat fewer nutrient-rich foods. They also eat high-sugar and high-fat foods less often.

The survey revealed that **adolescent diets are very different around the world**. It also showed that adolescents in only 2 of the 72 countries eat enough fruits and vegetables. But adolescents in most countries drink carbonated beverages at least once a day. They also eat fast food once a week on average.

What do young people say are the most important factors for their food choices in each type of food environment?

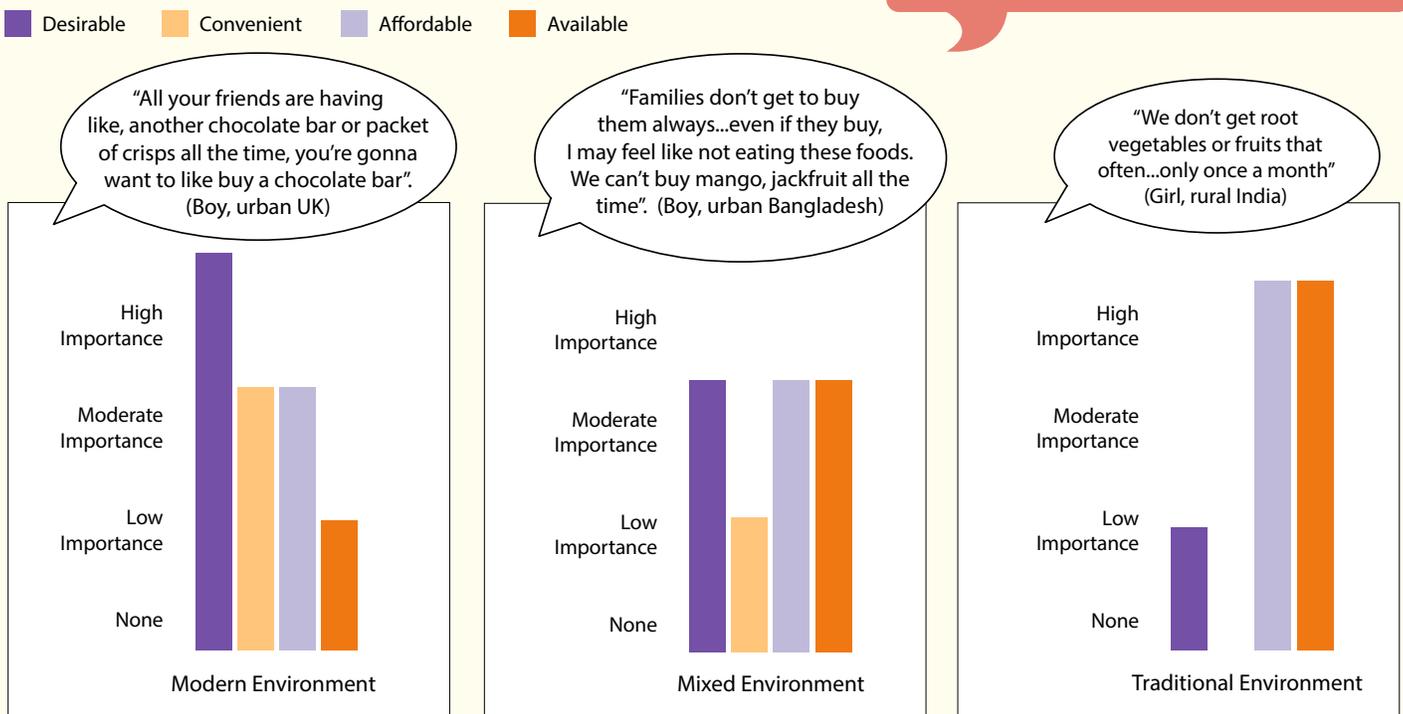


Figure 1: What young people from different food environments said determines their food choices.

2. Factors affecting food choice

In all food environments, adolescents have the ability to make food decisions (**autonomy**). They also have the ability to act on those decisions (**agency**). **But the amount of autonomy and agency adolescents have differs among the environments, and this affects food choice (Fig.1).**

Traditional food environments

Many traditional food environments are in areas experiencing **extreme poverty** and **food insecurity**. According to interviews, adolescents in this environment value eating with peers. But they don't always have the chance to. That is because they often have other tasks taking up their time, including obtaining and preparing food.

Mixed food environments

Many adolescents in a mixed environment think of non-traditional foods, such as pizza, as a symbol of being modern. Some adults reported that their adolescents skip meals.

Instead, they eat unhealthy snacks. But in many countries, adolescents still want to eat at home. That's because they think meals at home are safe and healthy.

Modern food environments

Adolescents in a modern environment have a lot of autonomy and agency. Many of them purchase a lot of their own food. Advertisements for nutrient-poor foods are also a characteristic of this food environment. Studies show that social media plays a big role in promoting unhealthy foods. Social media also tags vegan and vegetarian diets as healthy. While this is sometimes true, all people need to be careful to eat a balanced, nutritious diet. This is especially true for adolescents.

Discussion

Current food environments do not promote healthy food choices. **In some mixed and modern environments, nutrient-rich foods are more difficult to get.** Nutrient-poor foods are easy to access, inexpensive, and highly advertised. **In some traditional environments, poverty and food insecurity put adolescent health at risk.**

Many adolescents do not choose food based on how healthy it is. Instead, food is an important way to express uniqueness. It also provides a sense of belonging, since eating is often a social experience. That is why countries need policies and programs that enable and encourage healthy food.

To do this, we need more research to find ways to make nutritious foods more appealing. Adolescents have a lot to say about why they eat what they eat and what will motivate them to make changes. That means we must involve them in the conversations to create food programs. Only then can we help them navigate towards a healthy and socially appealing diet.

Conclusion

Becoming an adult means you have more control over what you eat. But what you eat also determines your current and future health. As you go through your day, think about what influences your food choices. Think about why you value your food. Is it to express your autonomy? Is it to fit in with

your friends? Is it because someone online likes a particular food? Once you have figured it out, discuss it with a doctor or trusted adult. Think about ways that you can be yourself, feel like you belong, and eat healthy food.

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Glossary of Key Terms

Agency - the ability to take action.

Autonomy - the ability to make decisions for yourself.

Extreme poverty - the condition of living on less than \$1.90 per person per day.

Food environment - where people make decisions about getting, preparing, and eating food.

Food insecurity - not having consistent access to enough food to live an active and healthy life.

Gray literature - information published by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), industry, government organizations, and inter-governmental agencies. Examples of this type of literature include reports, policy literature, working papers, newsletters, government documents, and speeches.

Check your understanding



- 1 What evidence supports the claim that most adolescents do not get the recommended amount of nutrient-rich foods?
- 2 What type of food environment do you think you live in? Explain your answer.
- 3 What are a couple of ways most adolescents value the food they eat? How true are these for you? Can you give an example?
- 4 Why should countries designing programs that promote healthy eating consult adolescents?
- 5 Find a healthy food or meal that you would like to eat. How would you promote this food or meal to your peers if you created an advertisement or social media post?

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