There is a wide gap between the science of nutrition and its application in food buying, preparation, and consumption. Knowledge of what foods are nutritionally required for good physical sustenance does not dictate individual choice of what we consume. Habits have a predominant effect on our food intake and health. We must recognize some of the factors which influence behavior before we can effectively alter them.

Some important determinants which mold existing individual and family food behavior patterns are one’s culture, ethnicity, and social and psychological perceptions toward food. These factors influence where, how, what and sometimes why we eat or purchase the foods we do. Food availability, costs, and one’s economic status are factors which are interwoven into food selection. Each of these facets will be examined individually in this chapter and related to food consumption and purchasing trends.

A people’s culture develops over a long period of time. Anthropologists study mankind’s culture to provide us with clues to our ancestral beginnings. Culture incorporates the historical events which participate in the development of our current way of life. It is the conglomeration of everyday living. Such things as birth, death, pregnancy, sex, illness, disease, the process of food acquisition and preparation, caring for family members, and hierarchical structure are included in “culture.” Culture evolves as language, religion, politics and technology change. Culture has a value system and is a learned phenomenon.

Food habits are an effective means to communicate many aspects of one’s culture. Habits can determine what foods are eaten as well as when, why or how. Culture determines what foods we should eat. It may determine what combination of foods comprise a meal. For example, what would be appropriate for lunch may be unsuitable for dinner. Generally bacon and eggs are more acceptable for breakfast fare than for dinner fare. There are regional variants to meal patterns too. Southerners prefer grits while Northerners choose fried potatoes. Specific foods become symbolic with various life events. At Thanksgiving, Americans expect turkey and dressing feasts; a birthday needs its cake; New Years Eve parties require champagne; for some,

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**How Customs Develop**

Changing food availability can affect customs. During the Middle Ages, inadequate meat supplies motivated a papal ruling requiring fish on Fridays. Food taboos often developed when eating a food was linked to subsequent illness or death. The development of Orthodox Kosher dietary laws was motivated by high rates of diseases such as trichinosis and hepatitis following impure pork and shellfish consumption, respectively. Although the association of pork and shellfish with those diseases has been virtually eliminated, the taboo of these foods for many prevails.

Food use has had political significance in history. The interrelationship between food, economics and a new nation’s political views escalated to war and the birth of a new nation’s independence with the Boston Tea Party. Today food is still a weapon in foreign policies and diplomacy. The price of food in the United States today is still affected by worldwide supply and demand. It is anticipated that by 1990 America could be supplying 15 percent of the rest of the world’s food.

**Social Influences** — Through the study of sociology, human behavior is understood in terms of social phenomena. It is the study of man’s group behavior. Social class influences value systems, social symbols and behavior patterns. In the United States, social classes are less rigid and distinct than in some countries. Class lines blur as movement from class to class occurs.

Food is symbolic of motherhood. Breast feeding is often the first bonding between mother and child. Much conscious and unconscious learning occurs between parent and child during the early feeding regimen. Long after childhood certain foods will provide memories and will be valued for reasons other than nutritional density.

People tend to eat foods that are readily available. Affordability is contingent to their choices. The breaking of bread together, the second helping, and the party with the most abundant food supply are ways people have expressed — through food symbols — sociability, warmth, and friendliness. Eating together as a family unit tends to build stability and closeness.

Foods may be accepted or rejected because of their status. . . . Lobster and steak, generally considered high prestige foods, are served at dinners with honored guests. Beans and frankfurters would not be considered guest fare and may be ranked low in prestige.

**Ethnicity** — Our Nation is a melting pot of people from many lands. We have the unique opportunity to learn and share our diverse ethnic backgrounds with each other. For the most part, however, people resist change. Yet the mobility of the American way of life affords us the opportunity to experience many ethnic cuisines and cultures.

People share a tendency to be culture bound. Familiarity with one’s culture — that is, the values, customs, and traditions — tends to make it difficult to change. With different cultures we almost automatically become judgmental. Ours is “the best.” We are resistant to experience new foods and cultures. Many Americans are overcoming these bonds of ethnocentric prejudices. These
people are lucky individuals as they are experiencing and learning new tastes and customs, and, as a result, new eating habits may materialize. Still, the ethnic base of our food consumption patterns provides homogeneity within a group, diversity between groups, and persistence in chosen patterns.

Psychological Influences
Individual behavior patterns are the result of many interrelated psychosocial influences. Perception and motivation shape food habits. Perception is the process of adding meaning to what is absorbed through the senses. Perception limits understanding but enables people to organize the multitude of sensory input. Subjective stimuli like hunger, thirst, fear, self-interest and values influence responses to the outer world. Responses are identified as behavior. Motivations, however, differ among people. Foods accepted by one individual may be rejected by another in different circumstances. Hunger and thirst are our primary physiologic needs. Yet our need for safety, affection, self-esteem and self-fulfillment may supersede priority.

Emotional responses to food originate in early feeding experiences. Food nourishes the psyche as well as one’s body. Foods carry symbolic meaning. To many, milk symbolizes security and comfort. Meat is symbolically the only food that can make men strong. Eggs never quite substitute for meat despite their nutritional equivalence. Fruits and vegetables symbolize love, beauty, sexuality, and luxury. Sweets, often used to bribe children, are perceived as reward foods.

Foods used in early feeding patterns can carry the same reward/punishment concepts throughout adulthood. Some foods are age related. Strained foods can be considered as infant food by pubescents and adults and thus rejected. Adults are privileged to consume coffee, tea, and alcohol. Peanut butter is labeled as children’s food. As can be seen, food perceptions can motivate food choice for a lifetime.

Consumption Trends — Food habits have altered significantly since the beginning of the century. Changes reflect such factors as shifting population stratification, new technologies, changing affluence, the development of government food programs, and growing concerns with health. Food consumption surveys provide a means of evaluating trends of food disappearance. However, specific values exaggerate actual intakes of food by up to 25 to 30 percent.

Trends are a tool which indicate what an “average American” consumes. When evaluated in terms of prior surveys, they offer a general idea of what we are consuming as a people and some changes in our eating habits over time. For example, Americans today are consuming more meat, fish, poultry and dairy products (except butter) than we did in 1900. We are also consuming more sweets, fats, and processed products. Since food consumption patterns are one of many aspects of culture, the forces which produce cultural change generate changes in food practices and purchases.

Food Buying and Economics
Food-buying patterns in the 1970’s and 1980’s are rapidly changing. Americans are eating out more frequently at primarily fast food restaurants. At home there is an increased demand for convenience products, labor-saving devices, and small-portion packaging. The fast
food industry has expanded enormously over the last 25 years. Between 1970 and 1980 fast food sales have increased over 300 percent. These establishments provide the assets of convenience and reasonable cost. They serve the busy American lifestyle well. Young middle and upper middle income families are patronizing fast food restaurants most frequently. Convenience foods such as frozen prepared meals, and processed foods such as luncheon meats, additionally serve as time-saving devices for people on the move.

In urban areas there has emerged an "occupational" meal pattern. Adults not employed outside the home generally consume leftovers from the previous day's dinner, some time between breakfast and dinner. Light breakfasts of coffee and doughnuts and quick lunches of sandwiches and fruit drinks or soda are more common for people employed outside the home. The traditional heavy breakfast pattern of milk, eggs, biscuits, and bacon or sausage are reserved for weekends, holidays, and "off days."

Technological advances such as freezing, dehydration, canning and food additives have made it possible to purchase a wide variety of products. Foods like orange juice are now available year-round. Extended shelf life of grain products, such as breads and cereals, have enabled the American consumer freedom of choice between store-bought bread and homemade bread. Microwave technology enabled development of a much faster cooking procedure. With increased accessibility to microwave cookery, a new market of convenience foods was created.

Convenience products are taking a larger portion of our food dollar. They require more shelf space in the supermarket. This ultimately will affect food cost. There are increased costs due to processing, packaging, distributing, and transportation. Often there is greater waste. Yet Americans are demanding convenience products.

Traditional family structure is changing. Today there is a shift toward more households comprised of either two working parents, single-parent families, or self-sufficient singles. Family size is shrinking. There is growth in the teenage-parent and older citizen populations. As individuals and families adapt to the requisites of new lifestyles, concurrent changes are realized in chosen meal patterns. For example, more households have both wife and husband employed. Men are seen partaking more in household chores which include the purchase of foods and preparation of meals.

**Teen Parents Have Minor Impact**

In recent decades changes in the sexual behavior of teenagers involve all segments of the population. There is a growing number of teenage parents today. Teenage parents appear to have minor impact on food purchases in the marketplace. Most teenage parents remain dependent on their immediate family for advice and support. While they remain in their parents' home, their parents generally are the gatekeepers to their food choices. Some teenagers manage to establish independent households. Due to limited resources — including income, education, and job opportunities — their shopping habits remain those established and learned from their parents or those of low-income populations.
Teenagers have unique eating habits. They frequently skip meals and replace them with low-nutrient density snacks. Many meals are eaten out at fast food restaurants. Food variety may be minimal. Snacking is an integral part of their eating pattern and may provide up to one-fourth of their caloric intake.

Older citizens are increasing in absolute numbers as well as proportionate contribution to the population. If the current trend toward small families continues, it is estimated the elderly may comprise one-fourth of the population by the year 2000. Food selections of older Americans are determined primarily by economic,

*The fast food industry has expanded enormously over the last 25 years. Such establishments provide the assets of convenience and reasonable cost. At some fast food restaurants, such as this one, you don't have to leave your car.*
social, and health factors. Many seniors are on restrictive budgets and may be unable to purchase or physically prepare many foods. They tend to follow simple, monotonous diets which are compatible to available limitations. Unfortunately, their diets are incompatible with their nutritional needs. The older population group frequently purchases convenience and economical foods. Small quantity purchases and smaller portion purchases are more common among this group of people.

Income, food availability, and market atmosphere influence purchasing behaviors and consumption choices. As income diminishes, people begin setting priorities for their available funds between housing, transportation, food, clothing, health care, and entertainment. Some of these are fixed costs and cannot be altered. The food budget, however, is a variable cost and thus becomes a primary target for constraint. Either a larger proportion of the income is spent on food, or less luxury food items are purchased. More attention is given to planning, preparing, and purchasing foods of comparable nutrient value and high nutrient density during inflationary times.

Problems Among the Poor
Tremendous problems exist among the poverty stricken. The "culture of poverty" permeates not only income but all aspects of their lives. Generally they reside in inadequate or overcrowded housing. Problems related to cooking, refrigeration, storage, and sanitation exist. These problems affect food selection. Often limited education serves as a barrier to job opportunities. Poverty, unlike inflation, is a chronic problem. For the poverty-bound person, food purchasing provides limited freedom of choice and ability to meet food needs. Limited transportation restricts the ability to shop at a variety of stores for the best prices, selections, and quality. Limited funds restrict purchasing of nonessential sale items. Quantity purchasing of items when available at special prices for future use is often held to a minimum. Small neighborhood grocery stores and supermarkets in low-income neighborhoods often charge more than comparable stores in higher income neighborhoods. Some of these consumers are entrapped to purchase foods in these stores because of outstanding credit indebtedness and other limitations. All of these problems among poverty stricken individuals demonstrate how both physical and financial availability can affect their food-purchasing patterns, habits, and choices.

Government food programs offer opportunities to increase the food purchasing power and, to some extent, nutrition awareness of this sector of the population. There are several government programs such as school lunch programs; supplemental food programs for women, infants and children; and the food stamp program. While each program has different goals, they guide the recipients' purchases and/or consumed food choices.

In Summary — Many factors influence our eating patterns and purchasing power. Our cultural, social, and ethnic backgrounds are unique. These factors seem most influential in the American diet on holidays and/or special occasions. At the present time, economics is the major determinant in food purchasing choices. Therefore food consumption trends are changing as economics vary.