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Food Habits

HABIT IS A POWERFUL FORCE in determining the food that becomes us. We eat according to our established food habits — and like all habits these can be good or they can be poor.

Food habits are the sum of our attitudes and ideas, our likes and dislikes, and our experience and practices of choosing and eating food.

Our food habits are good when we are willing to eat the kinds and amounts of food which science has proved



we need for optimum nutrition. Good food habits mean that we know food becomes us, that we mean to supply the best and become the best. "Willingness to eat" does not mean that we have to like all kinds of food equally well. Most of us have special preferences, favorite foods, and also definite dislikes. A willingness to eat means a promise to ourselves that we will not confine our food selections to favorite foods, especially when doing so leads to poor diet and on to nutritional bankruptcy.

Poor food habits mean that we eat only what we like regardless of what we need, and that we have a closed-door policy toward change. Often we do not realize that our food habits may be built on whim and prejudice and indifference. When we become aware of this we have taken the first step toward building better food habits.

FOOD AND FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Food habits begin to form with our earliest experience with food. As babies we had our first experience with people through food, and from this we got our first impressions about the world in general. If we had food when we wanted and needed it, then we got the idea that people were nice and friendly and comforting and that the world was rosy. But if we had to cry until we were exhausted each time before we were fed, we got different impressions. We thought the world was a tough place, where we had to fight even for our food. Certainly we did not have a comfortable, happy association between people and food.

The present trend in infant feeding is to permit a baby to set his own feeding schedule according to *his* hunger instead of *our* clock. This makes him more satisfied and comfortable; he gains the impression that food is wonderful and the world is a nice place with nice people in it.

Perhaps as children we were greatly confused about the place of food in our world. Even though it was a basic need like shelter and clothing, food was used in many ways that had nothing to do with our need for it. Sometimes we had to eat things that mother said tasted "good-good" and yet nobody else ate. Other times we were not given things because mother said they tasted "bad-bad" and yet we saw the grownups having second servings. Soon we learned to use food as a weapon to fight back at the world and at parental authority in particular.

Sometimes our parents used food to discipline us, giving us extra or special kinds as a reward, or sending us to bed without any to punish us. A child soon learns he can please or displease his parents, gain attention or create a crisis by eating or not eating — depending on what he wants to accomplish.

Poor food habits often develop because we use food in ways that it is not meant to be used. Basically food is for life and health and security, not for punishment and reward and attention-getting.

ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS

Why are we so concerned with the food habits that children are forming? First, because at every age the body must be supplied with the right materials in suf-



ficient amounts if it is to grow and develop to the full extent of its possibilities. This is especially true the first twenty years of life. Food must provide our chief source of these materials.

Second, the eating habits and attitudes we form as children dictate much of what we eat when we are adults. We grow up eating certain foods prepared in certain ways, and as adults we almost unconsciously expect and prefer to eat in the same way. If we do not have the foods we are accustomed to, we often try to change things—where we eat, how the food is prepared, or who prepares it.

One of our responsibilities as parents is to equip our children with good habits in every phase of living. Good food habits at any age do not just happen. Without guidance a child may form the habit of eating too much food, of eating too little food, or of not eating some of the nutritionally important foods. The terms *self-selection*, *self-direction*, or *self-demand*, as used in child feeding, are not meant to imply self-indulgence or self-destruction of health by poor food habits.

A child learns by example and experience what to eat and what to think about food. It is not uncommon for parents to give their children the best possible social and educational advantages and yet deny them a most important ingredient of good health by setting a poor example of what to eat and what to think about food.

Example also may influence a child's attitude toward new food experiences. When he visits a place near the seacoast will he want to try the flavor of fish unknown to him in the Midwest? Or will he resist the new taste adventure and order what he is used to so he can stay

in his own little food world? A person's interest in new foods and flavors is usually one indication of the breadth of his social experience and his interest in the world beyond his own back yard.

FOOD AND ASSOCIATIONS

We think of certain foods in connection with certain experiences or situations, and these associations account for some of our food habits. We may think of soft, milky foods in connection with illness and therefore consider them unsuitable for well folks; we may associate salads with feminine luncheons and think of salads as "sissy foods" for men; we may feel that because puddings are eaten with a spoon instead of a fork they are "childish" food. Those raised on a farm may believe skim milk is fit only for pigs. Some of us think that organ meats such as liver, heart, and kidney are inferior or "not nice."



We have special associations with the foods we ourselves ate on busy, steamy wash-days, the foods we had when company came, the foods we ate when we were away from home, at grandmother's house, at church suppers, and at Fourth of July picnics. Sunday foods and holiday foods were an important and usually happy part of our childhood experiences.

It is not uncommon for our war veterans or people from war-torn countries to have an extreme revulsion for the kind of food they were given during times of stress, even though the food may have saved their lives. Sometimes long afterwards, through association alone, they become ill just from the sight or smell of it.

We rate some foods as "high class" because they are of superior quality or size, or are unusual, or simply because they are expensive and suggest social standing. On the other hand we are likely to rate foods that are used by people on relief or are included in low-cost meals as "low class" because they suggest charity and poverty to us.

A LITTLE CHECKUP

Appetite alone is not a reliable guide to what we need to eat for wise weight and good nutrition. Many foods are high in appetite appeal and low in nutritive value. Therefore, it is wise to check up on our food habits occasionally. ~~The kinds and amounts of foods we need for good nutrition will be discussed in the chapters ahead.~~ We should check to see if we and others in our family are eating these regularly.



Appetite is our *desire* for food, hunger is our *need* for it. Few of us ever feel the pain that goes with real hunger, because our habit of eating several times a day renews our energy supply before hunger broadcasts any urgent distress signals.

How we look and feel tells us something about our food habits. At every age the outward and visible signs of good nutrition are usually apparent in our physical appearance, our disposition, our emotional reactions, and our vigor and stamina.

It is safer and easier to build good food habits than to correct poor ones. But ridding ourselves of poor food habits need not be hard if we stop trying to find excuses for them. Sometimes it helps to look into the reasons for them. Often we find we do not know these reasons;

we have forgotten the unpleasant associations which are responsible for our dislike of certain foods. We then can start to build pleasant associations with these foods, or at least we can arrive at a neutral "enlightened" attitude and eat them when we know we need them. Often unpleasant food associations and habits of omissions can be unveiled for what they are — barriers to good nutrition.

Improving our food habits can be an adventure in eating many kinds of good food. The first step is to recognize that we can profit by bringing our ideas and actions about food and eating up-to-date. The second is to get sensible, accurate information about food and health, and the third step is to use this information in choosing the food that becomes us. We'll find it can be fun and definitely rewarding.

