

A healthy diet is directly linked to good health. It is particularly important for pregnant women, babies and young children. Well-nourished babies and children are much less likely to become sick through disease and infection. Common infections like diarrhoea last longer and are more severe in malnutrition and repeated infection that often ends in death. Nearly two-thirds of all deaths in young children are linked to poor diet. Healthy eating is vital for child survival. People can usually provide staple foods for their families. However, though staple foods provide energy, they will not provide enough of the “building” and “protective” foods required. People with few financial resources may find it difficult to buy enough meat, fish, vegetables and fruit to provide a healthy diet. However, there are other ways of obtaining these kinds of food, including the use of traditional foods, wild vegetables, edible tree leaves, rearing chickens or rabbits, gathering and preserving wild fruits and buying carefully in the market.

A HEALTHY DIET

Good food is important for good health. Most people depend on one or two staple foods for much of what they eat. This may be a cereal (such as rice, wheat, maize or millet) a root crop (such as cassava, yam or potato) or starchy fruits (such as plantain or breadfruit). However, several other foods must be eaten with the staple food in order to meet our energy and nutritional needs. The types of foods that fill these needs best are:

Pulses (such as peas, beans, lentils and groundnuts) and oil seeds (such as sesame or sunflower seeds).

Foods from animals and fish. These are rich sources of many nutrients.

Vegetables and fruits, particularly dark green leaves and orange- coloured fruits and vegetables.

Oils, fats (such as margarine, butter, ghee) and sugars.

Ensuring a good mix of a staple food with several of these foods at each meal will result in a healthy diet.

WHY WE NEED DIFFERENT FOODS

The food we eat has three main functions: to give us energy, to build and repair our bodies and to protect us from disease. Most foods have a mixture of nutrients. To keep healthy, we should eat a good mixture of foods each day.

Energy foods help us to work and keep active. These are staple foods such as maize, rice and plantain, fats such as vegetable oil and animal fat, and sugar. Fats and sugars are only needed in small quantities for adults.

Building and repair foods help children grow and repair our bodies. Examples are groundnuts, beans, lentils, milk, eggs and meat. Foods made from milk and any food containing bones that are eaten (such as small fish or pounded dried fish) are good sources of calcium, needed to build strong bones.

Protective foods contain vitamins and minerals, which help the body to work smoothly and give protection against illness. Most fruits and vegetables are protective foods.

Clean drinking water is also important to maintain a healthy body.

VEGETABLES AND FRUITS

Many people believe that newly introduced vegetables such as lettuce and cabbage are better than traditional vegetables. In fact the opposite is usually true. Locally available vegetables such as spinaches usually contain many more nutrients. Dark green vegetables are good sources of Vitamin A and C which help give protection against illness. Even a small quantity of leaves added to a meal improves the food value.

Try not to overcook vegetables because long cooking destroys some vitamins. Add onions, tomatoes or oil to improve their flavour if necessary.

Plant vegetables throughout the year to provide food all year round, particularly during those times of year when vegetables and fruits are in short supply. Waste water from rinsing clothes and washing can be used to keep small quantities of vegetables growing.

The leaves and fruits of many trees can also improve family nutrition. They often have greater drought resistance than vegetables because of their extensive roots systems. Plant fruit trees in corners of the garden where they do not shade vegetable crops. Guava and citrus are all useful garden trees and their fruits contain high levels of vitamins.

PERSONAL HYGIENE

Good personal hygiene plays an important part in good health. We should wash ourselves, and our clothes,

regularly with soap and water to prevent the build up of dirt. Teeth and nails should be cleaned regularly.

It is really important to wash our hands immediately after using a latrine or after disposing of child faeces. It is essential to wash with soap and water before handling food. Hang a ‘tippy tap’ near the cooking area and use it regularly, both before handling food and in between handling uncooked and cooked foods.

Wear clean clothing when preparing food. Never cough, sneeze or smoke over food that is being prepared for eating. Take particular care with hygiene if you are ill and still need to prepare food. This will reduce the risk of passing on your infection. Always cover cuts and sores on your hands.

FOOD HYGIENE

Make sure all pans, dishes and tools used in preparing food are clean. Dry them on a drying rack and avoid using a cloth to dry them.

Uncooked meat and fish, and uncooked vegetables with soil on them, should never touch cooked foods. After handling uncooked food, wash hands well before handling cooked foods.

Some food such as milk, fish, cooked meat, cooked rice and other cereals will spoil more quickly than other kinds of food. Once cooked, these foods should not be left at warm temperatures for more than two hours before eating. Flies carry disease, so food should always be covered. When preparing food, put waste food into a covered container to avoid attracting flies. Use a pit for rubbish that is a good distance from homes. If possible, cover with earth each time the rubbish pit is used.

PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL FOOD NEEDS

Our food needs change through our lives. In the first few years of life, plenty of foods for building and protecting the body are necessary to build strong healthy bodies. Older children and adults who lead busy, hard-working lives, need larger amounts of staple foods for energy.

We will look after at the special needs of babies and young children. Pregnant and breast-feeding mothers are eating not just for themselves but for their baby too. They need plenty of all kinds of foods. Women also need plenty of Iron, Vitamin A and Calcium throughout their lives.

