

## CULTURAL AWARENESS IN NUTRITION SERVICES

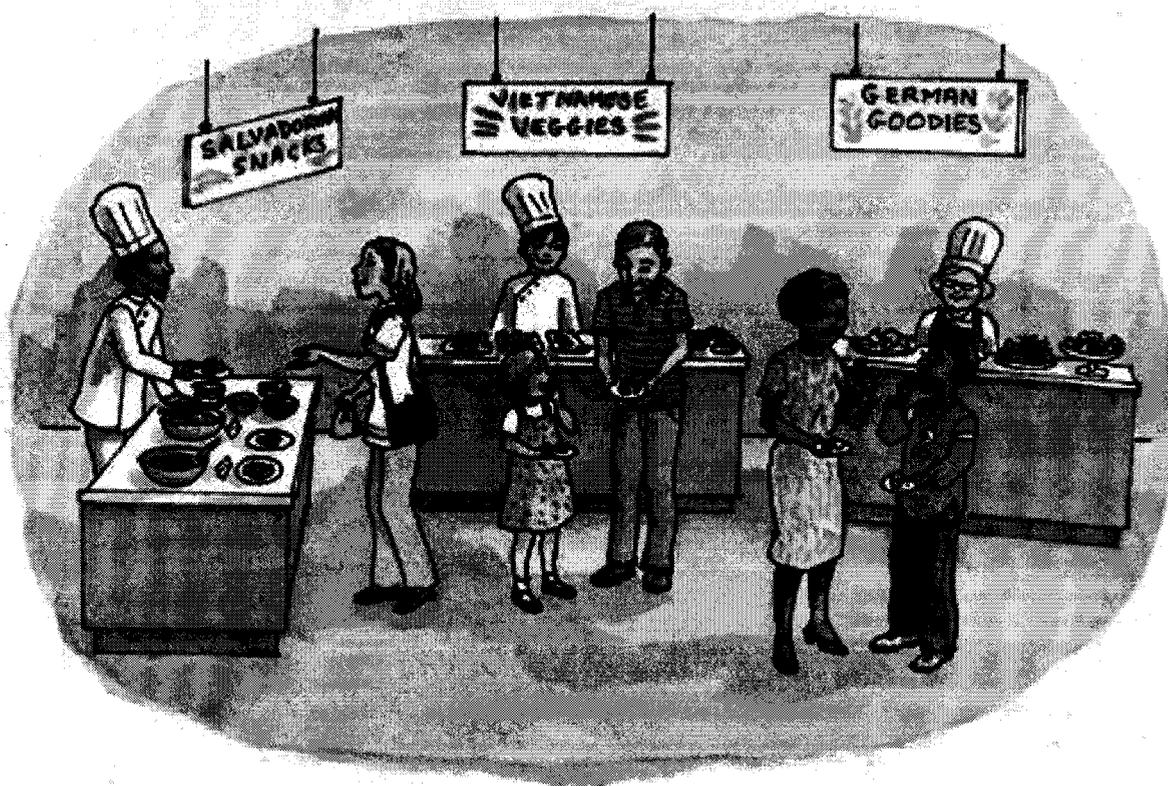
All people belong to some kind of cultural group. Culture influences the way people look at things, how they interact with others, and how they expect others to behave. Health professionals need to understand how their own cultures influence their attitudes and behaviors, and they need to understand other cultures and their implications for nutrition counseling.

Providing nutrition supervision to people from diverse cultural backgrounds can be both challenging and rewarding. Health professionals are given the opportunity to observe people and their traditions, including the foods they eat and occasions they celebrate. Such obser-

vations can enhance the health professional's awareness and knowledge of other cultures.

### Culture and Food

Food choices, which can be very personal, are influenced by culture. For many people, culture-specific foods are closely linked to their families and strong feelings of being cared for and nurtured. However, when discussing their food choices, people may respond by saying what they think the health professional wants to hear. Health professionals can encourage people to be more candid by asking open-ended, nonjudgmental questions.



The role of certain foods varies among cultures, but in most cultures, food is used for similar purposes. For example, in all cultures, staple, or core, foods form the foundation of the diet. A staple food—such as rice or beans—is typically bland, relatively inexpensive, easy to prepare, an important source of calories, and an indispensable part of the diet. In addition, people from virtually all cultures use food during celebrations, and many use food as medicine or to promote health.

Culture also influences how people prepare food, how they use seasonings, and how often they eat certain foods. These behaviors can differ from region to region and from family to family.

Acculturation—the adoption of the beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors of a dominant, or mainstream, culture—also influences a person's food choices. Acculturation may involve altering traditional eating behaviors to make them similar to those of the dominant culture. These changes can be grouped into three categories: (1) the addition of new foods, (2) the substitution of foods, and (3) the rejection of foods. People add new foods to their diets for several reasons, including increased economic status and food availability (especially if the food is not readily available in the person's homeland). Substitution may occur because new foods are more convenient to prepare, more affordable, or better liked than traditional ones. People, particularly children and adolescents, may reject eating traditional foods because it makes them feel different.

## Keys to Good Cross-Cultural Communication

Good communication during nutrition supervision is important for providing anticipatory guidance. To keep the lines of communication open, health professionals must overcome any real or perceived differences between them and the people they serve. Being open, honest, respectful, nonjudgmental, and, most important, willing to listen and learn is critical. Health professionals can help people in a way that maintains their dignity. Some keys to good cross-cultural communication follow:<sup>1</sup>

- *Respect personal space.* Health professionals can make people feel comfortable by asking them to sit where they want. This allows people to have the personal space they need.
- *Learn and follow cultural rules about touching.* It is essential for health professionals to learn these rules, including rules based on a person's sex. For example, in some Asian cultures, a person's head should not be touched because the head is considered the "seat of wisdom." In some American Indian cultures, a vigorous handshake may be considered a sign of aggression.
- *Establish rapport.* Health professionals can establish rapport with people by sharing experiences, exchanging information, and greeting and responding to them in culturally appropriate ways.
- *Express interest in people.* Health professionals can express interest in various ways: by smiling, being friendly and warm, asking questions (even about things they are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with), showing respect, and demonstrating that they are open-minded and trustworthy. Paying attention to children is also a good idea: This may impress mothers from particular cultures. However, health professionals need to be aware that people from some cultures believe that it is inappropriate to accept compliments about their children, especially if the children are present.
- *Listen carefully.* Health professionals must listen carefully and not interrupt people or try to put words in their mouths.
- *Respect silence.* Health professionals do not have to fill a silent moment with small talk. People need a chance to gather their thoughts, especially when they are trying to speak in a language they are not familiar with.
- *Notice how people make eye contact.* Health professionals need to observe how people make eye contact with family members and others. Many cultures consider it impolite to look directly at the person who is speaking. Lowering the eyes and glancing sideways may be seen as respectful, especially if the speaker is older or in a position of authority.

- *Pay attention to body language.* Health professionals must learn what messages are conveyed by body movements, such as turning up the palms of the hands, waving, and pointing, and which gestures should be avoided.
- *Reach the appropriate family member.* In some cultures, the oldest male is considered the head of the family, while in others, an elderly female has this role. Health professionals must ensure that their messages reach the head of the family.



- *Study a person's responses.* A "yes" response does not necessarily indicate that a person understands the message or is willing to do what is being discussed. The person may simply be showing respect for the health professional. For example, American Indians may not ask questions because they believe this would indicate that the health professional was not communicating clearly. People may smile or laugh to mask emotions or prevent conflict. Health professionals can make sure that a person understands by asking questions.

people maintain that health and disease are related to the balance between the "yin" and "yang" forces in the body. Diseases caused by yin forces are treated with yang foods to restore balance, and vice versa. In Puerto Rico, foods are classified as hot or cold (which may not reflect the temperature or spiciness of foods), and people believe that maintaining a balance between these two types of foods is important to health. Health professionals can become more effective by exploring such beliefs and incorporating them in their nutrition messages. (See *Ethnic and Regional Food Practices: A Series* in the list of suggested reading.)

## Common Nutrition Concerns Among Culturally Diverse Populations

### Food and Health Beliefs

In many cultures, people believe that food promotes health, cures disease, or has other medicinal qualities. In addition, many people believe that maintaining balance is important to health. For example, traditional Chinese

### Lactose Intolerance

Lactose intolerance is much more common in people of non-European ancestry. People who are lactose-intolerant may experience cramps and diarrhea when they eat moderate to large amounts of foods that contain lactose, such as milk and other dairy products. Children and adolescents may be able to avoid symptoms by consuming small servings of milk throughout the day or

by consuming lactose-reduced milk or lactase tablets or drops with milk. Cheese and yogurt are often better tolerated than milk because they contain less lactose. For people who cannot tolerate any milk or dairy products in their diet, health professionals can suggest other sources of calcium, such as dark green, leafy vegetables; tofu or corn tortillas processed with calcium; and calcium-fortified orange juice.

## Culturally Based Attitudes

People from different cultures may view body weight differently. Keeping a child from being underweight may be very important to people from cultures in which poverty or insufficient food supplies are common. They may view excess weight as healthy and might be offended if a health professional refers to their children as overweight.

## Summary

To meet the challenge of providing nutrition supervision to diverse populations, health professionals must learn to respect and appreciate the variety of cultural traditions related to food and the wide variation in food practices within and among cultural groups. Health professionals can take advantage of interactions with people from other cultures by sharing food experiences, asking questions, observing the food choices people make, and working with the community.

## Reference

1. Graves DE, Sutor CW. 1998. *Celebrating Diversity: Approaching Families Through Their Food* (rev. ed.). Arlington, VA: National Center for Education in Maternal and Child Health.

## Suggested Reading

American Diabetes Association; American Dietetic Association. 1989–1996. *Ethnic and Regional Food Practices: A Series*. Chicago, IL: American Dietetic Association.

Kittle PM, Sucher K. 1990. *Food and Culture in America*. Florence, KY: Van Nostrand Reinhold.