



Varied menu is best path to good health

Variety may be the spice of life, but it is also the substance of good nutrition. It's a simple fact that a greater variety of foods in the diet increases your odds of obtaining enough of the 45 or so essential nutrients required by the body.

Today, our food environment offers a great variety of foods throughout the year. Despite this modern abundance, many people eat a rather limited variety of foods. Call them picky eaters, lazy eaters or just plain nutritionally sloppy eaters. But eating too narrow for too long may have serious long-term health consequences due to chronically low intake of some essential nutrients.

Question: Why are some people picky eaters?

Answer: People develop narrow eating habits for many reasons. The fear of eating new things, called neophobia, is a common trait of animals. This fear serves as a survival mechanism by reducing the risk of consuming toxic substances.

But long-term survival also depends on learning about the safe-food environment and maximizing the variety of safe foods to eat.

In addition, many healthful foods contain toxic substances that are a problem only when the food is consumed in excessive amounts. Consequently, relying on large amounts of a small number of foods increases the possibility of exceeding the body's tolerance for natural toxins found in foods.

It is important to be an appropriately selective eater to obtain the best foods for health. Yet some people have a great fear of foods that they perceive as being "unhealthy." In his book "Health Food Junkies," Dr. Steven Bratman coined this fixation on healthful eating as "orthorexia nervosa." A person with orthorexia eliminates foods from their diet to the extent that they eventually end up with serious health problems caused by limited intake of essential nutrients.

Curing orthorexia is basically the same as treating any form of brainwashing: Deeply ingrained beliefs about food and health must be changed.

Q: What can be done to address the problem?

A: Parents will tell you that some kids are just born as picky eaters. When this is the case, it becomes even more important for parents to work with children by maintaining a healthful food environment and encouraging the exploration of new foods as an exciting and fun activity.

In some stages of development, children grow very slowly and their calorie needs are rather low. During these times, a limited appetite might look like picky eating. Rather than tempting children with delectable treats so they "will eat something," it can be better to let children get hungry enough to enjoy eating a greater variety of healthful foods.

Joannie Dobbs, PhD, CNS and Alan Titchenal, PhD, CNS
are nutritionists in the Department of Human Nutrition, Food and Animal Sciences,
College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, UH-Manoa.
Dr. Dobbs also works with the University Health Service.
