

Dietary Behavior

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Evolutionary considerations

- Dietary habits are essential to survival
- Have played a central role in the evolution of mankind
- “Closed” programs vs. “open” programs

The dilemma of omnivores:

- To explore the resources, but in a safe way.
- Dietary behavior differs from other health related everyday behaviors.

Like/dislike mechanisms

- Food neophobia (“I don’t like it, because I never tried it”)
- Food neophilia (occurs when little variation, boredom...)
- Preference for sweet tastes (concentrated energy, less likely to be toxic)
- Preference for salt taste (?)
- Learned food aversions
- Learned food preferences
- Food as reward
- Instrumental eating/drinking

Learned food aversions

- Food consumption associated with feeling ill, vomiting...
- One-trial learning
- Resistant to change
- Novel food more easily aversive
- Circumvents cognitive processes

Learned food preferences

Food consumed associated with

- Pleasant meal situation
- Recovery from illness
- Sweet tastes

Instrumental eating/drinking

- Using a highly preferred activity as a reward for eating results in a decrease of the preference for the food eaten.
- Example: “If you eat this fish (drink the glass of milk), you can watch TV until midnight.”

Liking is a powerful determinant of preference

Basic reasons for accepting/rejecting foods:

1. Sensory-affective factors
2. Anticipated consequences
3. Ideational factors

Basic reasons

1. Sensory-affective factors

- Like or dislike for sensory aspects (taste, smell)
- Good tastes vs distastes
- Within-culture variation in food preference

2. Anticipated consequences

- Beliefs about the consequences of ingesting food items
- Short-term effects: satiation, nausea
- Long-term: social status, health effects

3. Ideational factors

- Acceptance/rejection due to knowledge about what foods are, their origin or symbolic meanings.
- Major effect on food rejections.

Two major categories of rejection, based on ideational factors

- Inappropriate (sand, paper...) – most culture-wide rejections belong here
- Disgusting – strong sensory-affective loading, elicit nausea (animals, animals products, sea products...)

1. Distaste vs danger

- Learned food aversion

vs

- Allergic reaction

2. Disgust vs inappropriate

- Disgust is learned (infants don't have it).
Psychological contaminants, faeces... Typical facial expression
- Inappropriate: information

3. Good tastes vs beneficial

- Exposure is necessary for the acquisition of likings
- Exposure can increase liking
- Association of food with positive post-ingestive consequences
- Social influences are strong in acquisition of likes/dislikes (esp. children)
- Cognitive factors influencing dietary habits may be more elementary than the acquisition and retention of nutrition knowledge
- Information /education can lead an individual to a specific food, and may make him taste it, but what happens next is determined by other factors.

“You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink.”

Definitions

- Preference = refers to a choice of one item rather than another. Assumes availability.
- Liking = an affective response to food. Usually verbal self-reports.

Prerequisites for individual behavior change

- Knowledge (I know - *what*)
- Attitude (I want to – *why*)
- Behavior (I can do it – *how*)

Complex relations between

knowledge – attitude – behavior (k-a-b)

Behavior changes

- Most health-related risk behaviors have positive short-term consequences and negative long-term consequences
- Health-related protective behaviors have negative short-term consequences (at least initially) and positive long-term consequences
- Everyday health-related behaviors are determined by the interactions between:
 - Situations (occasions for...)
 - Consequences (positive, negative, short-term, long-term...)
 - Skills

Dietary behavior change

- Change situations
- Change consequences
- Learn skills
- “Think small”

Don't be frustrated:

- For any given topic in public health there are always more people who are uninterested than those who are highly interested and motivated.