

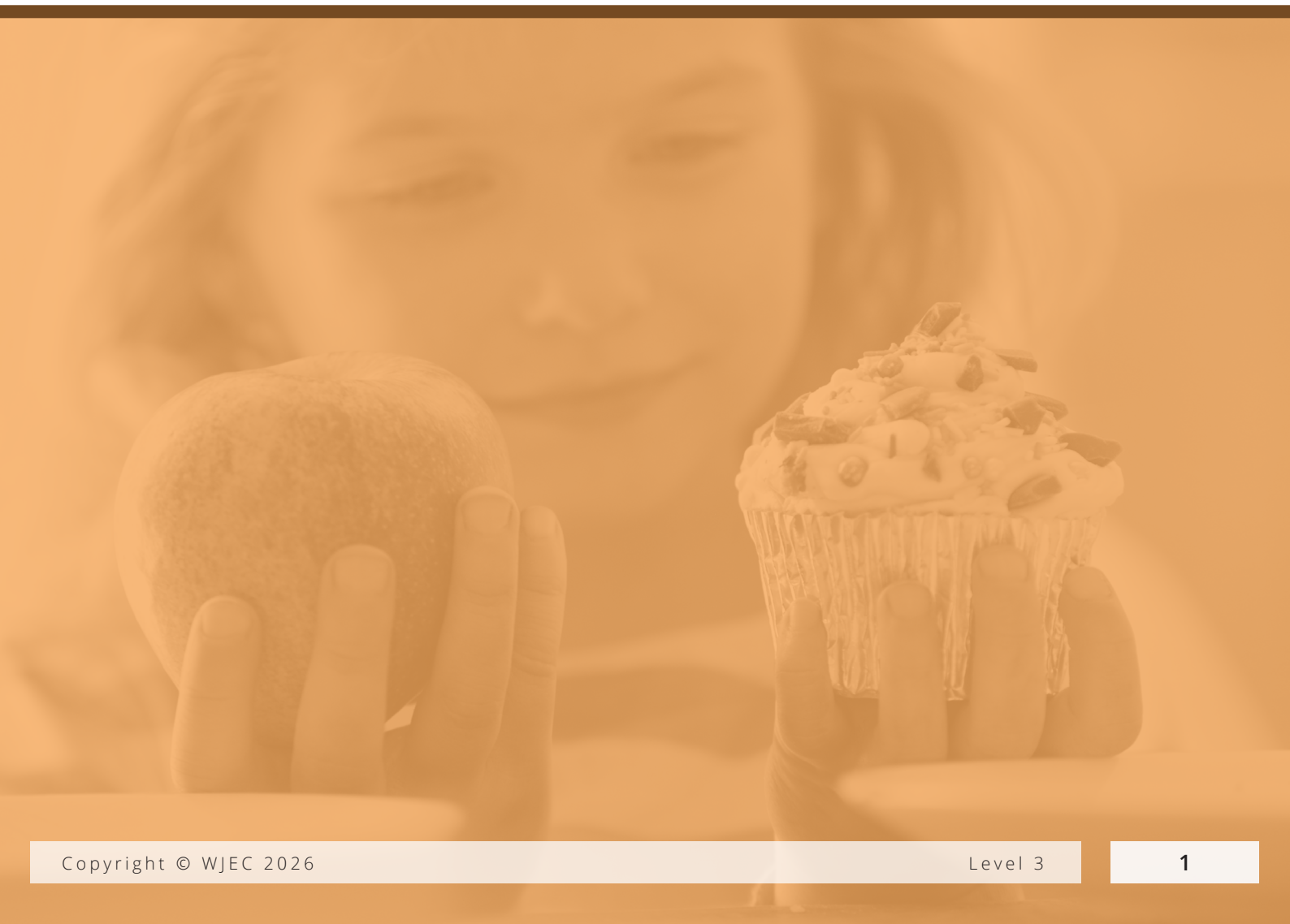


## 2.1 Factors affecting food choice

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These notes cover section 2.1 Factors affecting food choice, which includes:

- 2.1.1 The factors that influence food ingredient choice.



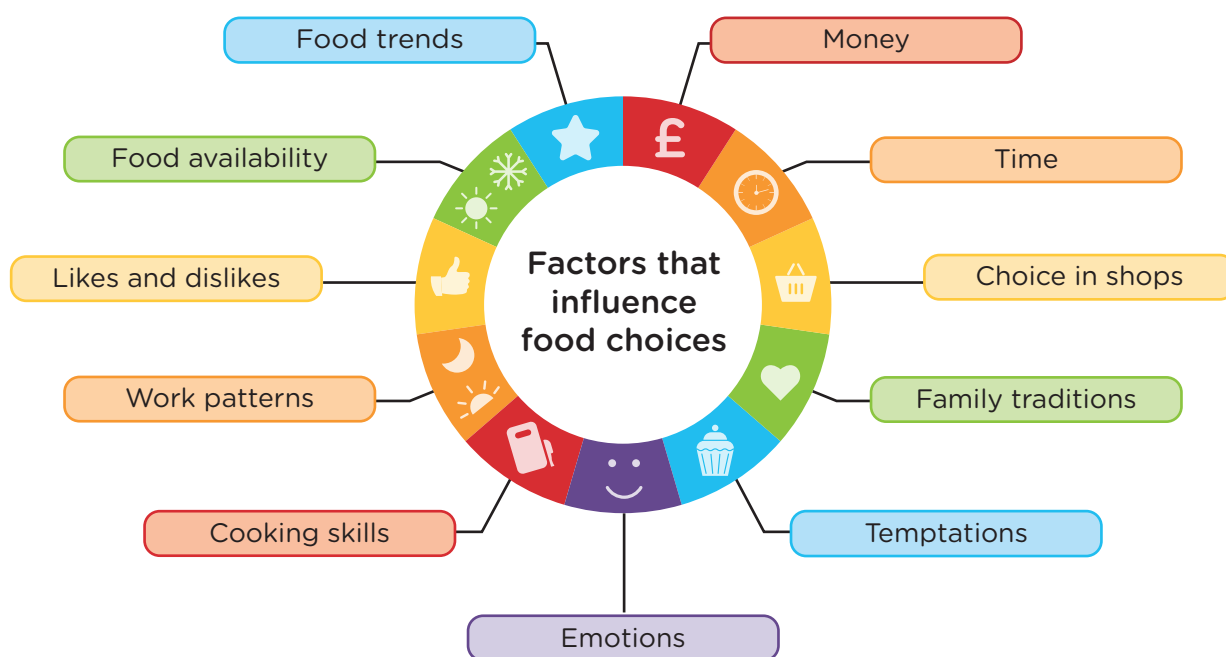


### 2.1.1 The factors that influence food ingredient choice

Unit 2 is assessed with a written non-examination assessment where you are required to plan, prepare, cook and present food items to meet the needs of a specific target audience, using appropriate level 3 skills and techniques.

Food choices and the reasons for them need to be included in the early sections of the assessment. You should keep up to date with current food trends so that work is accurate, relevant and topical. You will also need to draw on nutritional knowledge from Unit 1, as well as your knowledge of safety and hygiene.

The foods people choose to eat are shaped by a complex mix of influences; understanding these helps explain why eating habits vary so widely between individuals and cultures. Food choice isn't just about hunger – it is guided by personal preferences, social pressures, cultural traditions, health considerations and practical constraints. Psychological factors, such as mood and past experiences, play a role, while economic factors like income and food prices can limit or expand options. Marketing, advertising and the availability of foods in local environments also shape what people buy and eat. Together, these factors interact in complex ways to form the patterns of eating that define our daily lives, making food choice a rich and key area of study.



To keep up to date with emerging food trends that influence ingredient choices, you should monitor key areas such as:

- **Plant-based foods and alternatives:** Meat and dairy substitutes.
- **Functional foods:** Ingredients offering health benefits beyond basic nutrition.
- **Personalised nutrition:** Tailoring diets to individual needs.



To ensure your insights are accurate, combine industry monitoring with evidence-based research:

- **Verify with science:** Use evidence based sources such as the NHS (National Health Service), BDA (British Dietetic Association), and government dietary guidelines to ensure information is reliable.
- **Follow industry experts:** Track registered dietitians and nutritionists on professional platforms such as LinkedIn or verified Instagram accounts for expert commentary on new trends.
- **Read industry publications:** Stay informed on product development and consumer trends by reading publications such as *Food Manufacture*, *The Grocer*, and *Food Matters Live*.
- **Academic sources:** Use academic sources such as journals, textbooks and online databases to check that nutritional claims are backed by research.
- **Track media:** Watch documentaries, food programmes, and educational YouTube channels to explore changing food habits, innovations, and public health issues.
- **Track retail:** Monitor supermarket launches and food brand updates, as retailers often drive new trends through product development and seasonal changes.

The assessment for Unit 2 will provide details of a scenario and the target audience that foods need to be designed and prepared for. To accurately meet the needs of the target audience, a thorough understanding of the motivation for their food choices will need to be demonstrated, including nutritional and lifestyle factors.

Trends and fashions, as well as technologies, change over time, offering the consumer an increasing range of choice. Understanding the context of food choices, the reasons behind them, and the effect they have on the quality of an individual's diet is vital to be able to link the impact that diet has on short-term and long-term health.

### Cost

Food cost is one of the most influential factors shaping people's food choices, and its impact can vary widely across age groups, income levels and cultural backgrounds. Whether shopping in a supermarket or ordering meals, individuals often balance what they would like to eat with what they can afford. While taste, health and convenience all play important roles, prices often shape decisions about portion sizes, ingredient quality, and even the frequency of meals. For many households, sticking to a budget means choosing foods that offer the best value for money, which can sometimes lead to selecting cheaper, less nutritious options. This financial reality affects not only what foods are purchased but also long-term dietary patterns.



British pound banknotes



Individuals on lower incomes often prioritise foods that provide the most calories per pound, such as white bread, processed meats and white rice or pasta. In contrast, individuals with higher incomes might choose more fresh fruit and vegetables and whole grains, which are healthier but cost more. For example, a household on a tight budget may choose a large frozen pizza for £2 instead of buying the fresh ingredients needed to cook a homemade version of it, which could cost more. Limited money means more families are relying on food banks, leading to less food choices. As a result, income often shapes not just what people eat, but also the nutritional quality of their diet.



*A 'Foodbank Open' sign*

On the other hand, individuals with more disposable income might spend more on ultra-processed ready meals and takeaway foods simply because they do not have to worry about the cost of the foods. Additionally, healthy eating doesn't always mean expensive ingredients. Many of the most nutritionally-dense foods are some of the cheapest ingredients. It is possible to eat well on a budget by choosing affordable whole foods, reducing waste and planning meals effectively.

The cost of food affects choices at every life stage, as well as across all cultures and religions. Other dietary needs, such as a low sodium diet or managing an allergy, also contribute towards the cost of food.

To summarise, limited budgets often lead to a reliance on cheap, energy-dense ultra-processed foods, which can reduce the intake of fruits and whole grains. However, smarter shopping habits, such as comparing prices, choosing own-brand products, and seasonal meal planning, can reduce waste and make healthy, homemade eating more affordable.



*A shopper checking a long paper till receipt*



### Cultural influences

Culture is one of the strongest and most consistent factors shaping what individuals eat. It affects not only what foods people choose, but also how they prepare them, when they eat, and the meanings attached to certain meals. Cultural influences can come from family traditions, religion, social expectations, national identity and celebrations.

People are often introduced to certain foods from an early age based on their cultural background. These early experiences shape lifelong preferences. For example, pasta, olive oil, and tomato-based dishes are staples in Italian culture. In South Asian cultures, foods such as lentils, curry, rice, and spices are common. In Caribbean cultures, dishes like jerk chicken, rice, peas and plantains are typical. Because these foods are associated with comfort, memory and identity, individuals often continue eating them throughout their lives.



*An Indian family sharing and feeding each other traditional sweets during a celebration*

Festivals and celebrations often involve specific foods that hold symbolic meaning. Examples include Chinese New Year (dumplings, noodles and fish for prosperity), Christmas in the UK (roast dinners, mince pies, Christmas pudding), Diwali (sweets like laddoo and jalebi) and Eid (biryani, kebabs, and sweet dishes such as sheer khurma). These foods reinforce cultural identity and tradition, and people often associate them with family and community.

Culture influences what is considered 'normal' or acceptable to eat. In some cultures, eating insects is common and seen as a sustainable protein source. In other cultures, foods like raw fish (for example, sushi in Japan) are widely accepted. Some cultures place importance on large, shared meals, while others favour individual plates. These expectations shape what people feel comfortable eating.

When people move to different countries, their food choices may blend with the local culture. Immigrant families may substitute traditional ingredients with local alternatives if the original ingredients are too expensive or unavailable. New foods from the local culture may be adopted over time, for example British curries combining South Asian spices with UK preferences. This results in fusion foods, such as chicken tikka masala, which reflect cultural blending.

Different foods are eaten in different countries according to their availability and cost. Some countries consume insects as a source of high biological value (HBV) protein because they are cheap and sustainable. Insects are being looked into as a way of maintaining food security in developed countries. In recent years they have become available to purchase in the UK.



*Fried insects for sale*

Modern culture spreads quickly through media, influencing food choices across the world. For example, American fast-food chains such as McDonald's and KFC have shaped eating habits in many countries. Korean culture (for example, K-pop and K-dramas) has also increased global interest in foods like kimchi and Korean barbecue. Social media trends, such as viral recipes or 'healthy eating' influencers can shape what people choose to eat. Globalisation has made foods more accessible across cultures, leading to more diverse diets.

To summarise, cultural influences both shape and limit dietary habits; while expectations can restrict the exploration of unfamiliar cuisines, exposure to cultural dishes fosters varied tastes and lifelong enjoyment. Global exchange introduces new flavours and creative fusion dishes, yet fast-food globalisation can overshadow traditional diets and lead to less healthy eating patterns.



### Environmental factors and sources of foods

Environmental concerns are playing a growing role in how people choose the foods they buy and eat. Issues such as climate change, food miles, packaging waste, sustainability, and ethical production have become important to many consumers. Although cost and availability can limit some ethical choices, environmental awareness is increasingly shaping the way people shop, cook and eat.

Many people choose foods grown locally because they are perceived as better for the environment. Food that travels long distances (known as food miles) uses more fuel and creates higher carbon emission, while local food usually requires less transportation, storage and refrigeration. Buying local also supports local farmers and the local economy, and foods freshly harvested are higher in essential nutrients.

Consequently, people may choose to buy locally-grown apples instead of imported ones; local vegetables from farm shops or farmers' markets; or seasonal produce rather than foods grown in heated greenhouses abroad. However, local foods can sometimes be more expensive because they are not mass produced, so not everyone can choose them regularly.

Packaging, especially plastic packaging, has become a major environmental concern. Plastic packaging contributes to pollution and takes hundreds of years to break down, and excessive packaging leads to more waste in landfills. Consumers are increasingly aware of the environmental impact of single use plastics and because of this, people may:

- choose loose fruit and vegetables instead of pre-packaged products
- buy foods with recyclable or biodegradable packaging
- choose refill shops or zero waste stores
- avoid products with unnecessary plastic trays or wraps.



*A local vendor handing fresh organic produce to a customer at an outdoor farmers' market stall*



*A green reusable shopping bag*

Some brands now advertise environmentally-friendly packaging to appeal to eco-conscious shoppers.

Sustainable foods are foods produced in a way that either does not harm or causes minimal harm to the environment. Currently, key concerns include:

- deforestation, for example for palm oil or soya production
- over-fishing
- high water use to grow crops such as almonds or rice
- greenhouse gas emissions from livestock farming and industrial and global food production and distribution.



Consumers wishing to reduce their environmental footprint might opt to purchase more sustainable foods, including:

- buying sustainable fish, often labelled with The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) blue logo
- eating less meat and choosing plant-based proteins
- avoiding products containing almond or palm oil, unless it is certified as sustainable
- choosing organic, locally-grown foods that improve soil health and biodiversity and do not use synthetic chemicals.



*Oil palm plantation in Borneo*



*The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) logo*

Food waste is another major environmental issue, and consumers are becoming increasingly aware of its impact. Food waste discarded in landfills contributes to methane emissions; it also represents a waste of the water, energy and land used to produce it, as well as a waste of personal income. To prevent food waste and reduce its environmental impact, consumers can plan meals carefully to avoid overbuying, choose smaller pack sizes, and check the 'use by' date carefully. Additionally, they can use apps to access discounted surplus foods and cook leftovers creatively rather than throwing them away.

Plant-based diets – such as vegetarianism and veganism – are also being widely adopted for environmental sustainability. Generally, plant-based foods produce fewer carbon emissions than animal-based alternatives. Because livestock farming requires vast amounts of land, water and feed, many people are choosing to reduce their carbon footprint by cutting down on meat and dairy. Consequently, many consumers are opting for dairy-free alternatives like oat or soya milk, reducing their meat consumption through initiatives like 'Meat-Free Monday' or 'Veganuary', and eating more vegetables, grains and legumes.

Ultimately, cost is the main obstacle to choosing sustainable or organic foods, often outweighing other factors like poor availability or unclear labelling. Nonetheless, opting for eco-friendly products supports local farmers, lowers carbon emissions and plastic waste, and promotes a more sustainable food industry.



### Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations have an increasingly strong influence on the food choices many individuals make. Driven by personal values about fairness, welfare and environmental responsibility, these considerations include animal welfare, the fair treatment of workers, sustainability (**see the previous section, environmental factors and sources of food for further information**), and community support. By considering the wider impact of foods bought, consumers are therefore able to make more thoughtful and intentional food choices that align with their values and beliefs about what is fair, responsible, and beneficial for both people and the planet.

Many consumers are concerned about animal welfare, which leads them to choose options such as free-range eggs, higher welfare meat, or dairy from farms with better living conditions for animals. For example, UK consumers may look for foods featuring the Red Tractor logo, which ensures the product meets standards for safety, traceability, animal welfare and environmental protection. In some cases, people reduce or completely avoid animal products, viewing industrial farming practices as cruel or environmentally unsustainable. As a result, ethical beliefs often shape long-term dietary habits, prompting many to adopt a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle.



*The Assured Food Standards' Red Tractor logo*

The fair treatment of workers in the food industry has gained significant visibility in recent years as food production has become more globalised. Conscientious consumers choose products that guarantee fair wages and safe working conditions for farmers and producers, such as those labelled 'Fairtrade'. These labels reassure shoppers that their food was not produced through exploitation or unsafe labour practices. Even when Fairtrade products cost more than standard alternatives, some consumers are willing to pay the difference because supporting fair working conditions aligns with their ethical values.



*Fairtrade bananas*

Environmental ethics also play a significant role in food choices. Increasing awareness of sustainability encourages consumers to think about the environmental impact of the foods they buy. This may lead them to choose sustainably-caught fish, avoid products linked to deforestation, or select organic foods that support more environmentally-friendly farming methods (**see the previous section, environmental factors and sources of food for further information**).

These ethical considerations can also influence where people choose to shop. Many consumers prefer buying from local farmers and independent businesses to support their communities and reduce the environmental impact of long-distance food transport. Shopping locally is often seen as a powerful way to strengthen local economies, promote seasonal produce and reduce food miles.

Many people feel it is wrong to waste food when others face food insecurity, recognising that discarding food also wastes the resources used to produce it. This leads individuals to plan their meals more carefully, use leftovers creatively, and buy only what they need. Some even choose imperfect or 'wonky' fruit and vegetables to help reduce supermarket waste. These decisions reflect a desire to act responsibly and minimise harm to both the environment and society.

To conclude, while higher costs and limited availability often make ethical products – such as Fairtrade goods or higher-welfare meat – less accessible to many consumers, their benefits remain significant. Despite these financial and logistical barriers, choosing ethical produce remains vital for protecting the environment, ensuring animal welfare, and supporting fair working conditions for farmers and sustainable businesses.



### Media influence

The media has a powerful influence on consumer food choices by shaping the way foods are presented, advertised and understood. Television, social media, magazines, online influencers, and even packaging design all communicate strong messages about whether foods are appealing, healthy, trendy or desirable. These messages can strongly affect what individuals – especially children and teenagers – decide to eat.

Advertising remains one of the most significant ways the media affects food choices. Food companies spend large amounts of money promoting products that are often high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) such as fast food, ultra-processed snacks and sugary drinks. These adverts are designed to be eye catching, fun and memorable, making the foods seem exciting or essential. Children are especially influenced by colourful characters, catchy jingles and promotional offers. As a result, they may ask their parents or carers to buy the foods they see advertised, even if those foods are not the healthiest options.

#### ★ Key fact

Due to the negative effect that foods high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) have on the health and wellbeing of children and young people, the UK introduced strict TV advertising restrictions – specifically a 9pm watershed – effective from January 2026.

Social media has also become a major influence on food choices. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram and YouTube constantly expose users to viral recipes, food challenges and influencer recommendations. When influencers or celebrities promote certain foods, whether it is a trendy iced coffee, a new fast food item, or a particular brand of snack, many young people try these foods to feel connected to online trends. While social media can make some foods seem 'cool' or fashionable, its impact can be both positive or negative, depending on the types of foods and recipes being promoted.



*An influencer filming a cooking video on a mobile device*

Conversely, documentaries, social media posts, cooking shows and public health campaigns often encourage viewers to eat more fruits, vegetables and balanced meals. Government-led initiatives might warn about the dangers of too much sugar, or advocate for healthier options in school canteens. While these messages help people understand nutrition and encourage healthier habits, they often struggle to compete with the huge marketing budgets of commercial food brands.

Packaging and branding represent a more subtle form of media influence. Bright colours, attractive images and persuasive slogans on food packaging can make a product stand out on the shelf. For instance, cereal boxes aimed at children often include cartoon characters, games or collectible items, making children more likely to prefer those cereals over plain or healthier options. Adults are similarly influenced by packaging claims such as 'low fat', 'high protein', or 'organic', leading them to believe it is healthier or better quality. Item location on shop shelves also affects choices; manufacturers often pay extra to have their items stocked on aisle ends or at eye level to maximise visibility and impulse buys.



*End-of-aisle displays*



Food trends promoted by the media can also change eating habits. For instance, trends such as 'clean eating', veganism, protein-heavy diets, or specific foods such as avocado toast or smoothies became popular partly because they were widely featured online and in magazines. While these trends can inspire people to try new foods or eat more healthily, they can also create unrealistic expectations regarding the cost or appearance of 'healthy' food. Furthermore, some highly-publicised trends – such as strict ketogenic diets – can conflict with current government and NHS nutritional guidance.

In review, while commercial adverts for HFSS foods are often highly memorable and appealing, and unregulated influencer content can blur the lines of nutrition, the media is not entirely negative. Public health campaigns promote informed choices, and digital platforms like cooking shows inspire people to explore new foods and prepare healthier meals at home.

### Food availability and seasonality

Food availability directly shapes eating habits, often without consumers realising it. Factors such as location, seasonality, distribution, shop stocking decisions, and economic conditions all shape the daily choices people make. As a result, availability can influence diets just as strongly as personal preferences, cost or nutritional knowledge. When foods are easy to find and widely stocked in supermarkets, people are far more likely to purchase them. On the other hand, when foods are scarce, seasonal or expensive, they become less common in everyday diets.

Geographical location plays a major role in availability. People living in rural areas may have greater access to fresh, locally-grown produce, such as fruits, vegetables, eggs and meat from nearby farms – provided they have reliable transport. However, they may have fewer large supermarkets, which can limit access to certain global or specialist foods. In contrast, people in urban areas often have a wider variety of shops including major supermarkets, convenience stores, international food shops, and takeaway facilities. This availability can encourage more diverse food choices, including foods from diverse cultures. However, some city neighbourhoods may lack affordable fresh produce; these areas can become 'food deserts' or highly obesogenic environments, forcing individuals to rely more on ultra-processed or fast foods.



*Village convenience shop*

Furthermore, transport and distribution systems determine availability. Areas with good transport links and frequent deliveries tend to have a greater variety of foods, including fresh produce and international ingredients. In contrast, remote regions may have fewer deliveries, meaning less choice and higher prices. This can limit the diversity of an individual's diet based entirely on where they live.



*Freshly-picked strawberries*

Seasonal availability also plays a role in what people eat. Foods that are in season locally tend to be fresher, cheaper and more widely available. For example, British strawberries are tasty and affordable in the summer but less sweet and more expensive in winter when they must be imported from abroad. Consumers are therefore more likely to buy seasonal produce because it is better value for money. When foods are out of season, people may switch to alternatives such as frozen or tinned fruits and vegetables, which still offer nutritional benefits.



Economic availability influences food choices; certain foods become more expensive due to supply issues, for example:

- poor weather affecting crops
- rising production costs
- global shortages.

Therefore, people may avoid certain foods entirely, opting for cheaper options or not being able to source them at all. For example, if the price of fresh fish increases, individuals might choose tinned fish or plant-based sources of protein instead. This means that food choices can be shaped by wider economic factors that affect what is stocked and is affordable in shops.

Availability is heavily influenced by shops' decisions about what to stock. Supermarkets often promote certain foods through deals, displays and meal deal offers, making those items more tempting and convenient. If a retailer restricts its stock of healthier options, consumers may end up buying less nutritious foods simply because they are the most accessible options available. In this way, businesses play a key role in shaping food choices (**see the previous section, media influence for further information**).

To summarise, geographical location and retailer stock choices significantly influence dietary habits, as a lack of affordable fresh produce in certain areas can lead to a reliance on ultra-processed or fast foods. On the other hand, access to local and seasonal items promotes healthier, better-value eating, while the availability of international ingredients in urban centres supports cultural diversity and culinary exploration.

### Levels of physical activity

Physical activity level affects food choices; it influences energy needs, appetite, meal timing and nutrient priorities. Active individuals tend to choose foods that support performance and recovery, while less active individuals often need fewer calories and may prioritise lighter, more balanced meals. Matching food choices to activity level helps maintain energy balance, supports health, and prevent issues such as fatigue or unwanted weight gain.

Physical activity can also shape when and how food is consumed. Active individuals often plan meals around their workouts, choosing snacks that provide quick energy before exercise and foods that help with recovery afterwards. Examples include choosing a banana or granola bar before a run, or a meal with protein and carbohydrates – such as chicken with rice – after a gym session. People who are less active don't generally need to think about food timing in the same way, so their choices may be based on routine or preference rather than performance.

Additionally, physical activity can influence appetite. Some people feel hungrier after exercise and may choose larger portions or more filling foods. Others may experience a temporary drop in appetite after intense workouts and may choose lighter meals or snacks. These differences can affect the types of foods individuals reach for and how much they eat overall.

To conclude, physical activity promotes long-term health and intentional eating, whereas low activity levels increase the risk of weight gain through mismatched energy needs. Additionally, while performance foods (for example, protein bars, shakes) support specific fitness goals, their high cost can limit accessibility.



### Lifestyles

Factors such as time pressure, work demands, social habits, family responsibilities, activity level and personal goals all play a role in determining the way an individual's lifestyle affects their food choices. For example, individuals with busy lifestyles, such as those working long hours or juggling school and childcare, often prioritise convenience. This can lead to choosing quick options like ready meals, takeaways, snacks, or pre packaged foods because they save time and require little preparation. On the other hand, people with more free time may be more likely to cook from scratch, try new recipes, or plan meals in advance, which can result in healthier and more balanced food choices. Functional foods, such as kefir or kimchi, may appeal to these types of people.

Work and social schedules also play a role; people who work shifts, for example, may struggle to eat meals at regular intervals and end up eating late at night or relying on vending machines and fast food during their breaks. On the other hand, those with traditional 9–5 jobs might bring packed lunches or choose options from cafés and supermarkets near their workplace. Social lifestyles also influence food choices – someone who regularly meets friends for meals or goes out on weekends is more likely to eat restaurant or takeaway foods, which may be higher in calories, salt and fat compared to home cooked meals.



*A medical professional in scrubs sipping a coffee*

### ★ Key fact

Shift work disrupts the circadian rhythm (the body's natural internal clock), which can lead to cravings, snacking, irregular meals and unhealthy choices.

Family structure is another key lifestyle factor. Parents often choose foods that appeal to children, which can mean selecting familiar and easy-to-prepare meals that fit into family routines. Large households may buy in bulk to save money, while people living alone might choose single portion meals or simpler foods to avoid waste. Cultural traditions within the family can also influence lifestyle-related food preferences, such as cooking certain meals at weekends or following specific dietary customs.

Physical activity levels, hobbies and health goals also shape lifestyle and food choices. Individuals who participate in sports or exercise regularly often choose foods that support energy and recovery, such as higher-protein meals or carbohydrate-rich snacks. Others who are less active may prefer lighter meals or comfort foods. Personal goals – such as trying to lose weight, build muscle or eat more sustainably – can further influence day to day eating patterns.



*A family sitting on the sofa, eating pizza together while watching TV*



### Nutritional needs across the life stages

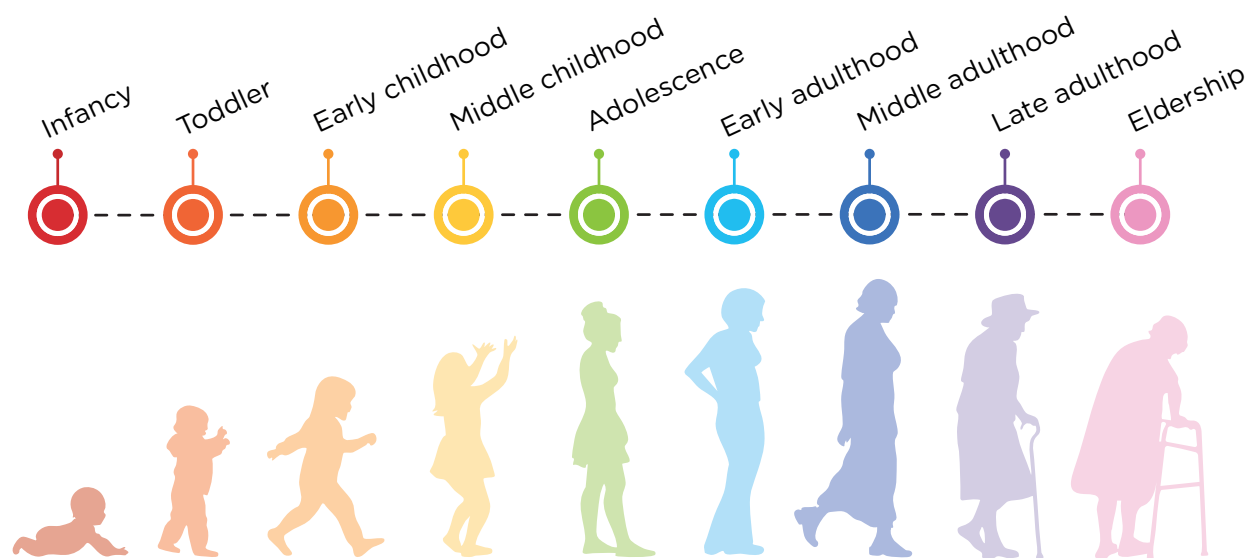
Nutritional needs change significantly throughout life, and these changes strongly influence the types of foods people choose. During childhood and adolescence, the body grows rapidly, so meals tend to focus on foods rich in protein, calcium, iron and energy to support healthy development. For example, children need more products containing calcium to build strong bones; iron rich foods for healthy blood; and nutrient- and energy-dense meals to fuel activity and growth. Teenagers, especially, require extra nutrients to support puberty, which means larger portions, more protein, and foods that boost iron intake.

Pregnant women also have specific nutritional needs; they need an increased intake of folic acid, iron and calcium which can be found in foods like dark leafy greens, fortified cereals, and milk to support both their health and the baby's development.

As people enter adulthood and older age, their nutritional needs shift again, affecting food choices in different ways. Adults generally need a balanced diet to maintain weight, energy levels and long-term health; they should therefore eat a diet rich in whole grains, fruits, vegetables and lean proteins. In older age, metabolism slows, and calorie needs decrease, so older adults may choose smaller, nutrient-rich meals rather than large portions. They often require more fibre to support digestion and more calcium and vitamin D to maintain bone strength, which can lead to choosing foods such as wholegrain bread, soup, soft fruit, fortified yoghurt, and oily fish. Additionally, changes such as a reduced appetite, difficulty chewing or medical conditions may influence older adults to choose softer foods or meals that are easier to prepare and digest.

**Refer to section 1.2.2 in Unit 1 for additional information on nutritional needs across life stages.**

### The nine life stages



*An infographic illustrating the nine human life stages from infancy to eldership*

### ★ Key fact

Eating a varied, well-balanced diet throughout life should be encouraged to help prevent nutrient deficiencies and non-communicable diseases (NCDs).



### Personal preferences

Personal preferences play a major role in the foods people choose because individuals naturally select foods they enjoy in terms of taste, texture, smell and appearance. These preferences often begin in childhood and are shaped by early experiences with food, family habits and cultural traditions. For example, someone who grew up eating spicy foods may prefer meals with strong flavours, while someone else who was raised on milder dishes might choose foods that are less seasoned. Preferences also relate to texture; some people like crunchy foods, while others prefer soft or smooth textures. These personal likes and dislikes significantly guide everyday choices, from what people buy at the supermarket to what they eat at home or when dining out.

Personal preferences can also be influenced by health beliefs, lifestyle goals and past experiences with food. For instance, someone who believes a certain food helps them feel energised may choose it more often, while someone who had a bad experience with a food may avoid it completely. Similarly, someone with health conditions such as diabetes or cardiovascular disease may tailor their diet to support their health condition or individual genetic profile. Preferences can also change over time; adults often develop a liking for foods that they didn't enjoy as children, for example bitter-tasting vegetables or coffee. Additionally, trends and social influences, for example trying new foods seen on social media or adopting diets (for example, plant-based diets), can shape personal preferences by making certain foods seem more appealing or fashionable. Overall, personal preferences play a major role because they determine what feels enjoyable, familiar and satisfying to an individual, which directly influences their daily food choices.



*A child refusing a spoonful of food*

Some individuals have heightened sensory sensitivity, which can make strong flavours, smells or textures difficult to tolerate, influencing their personal food choices. Repeated exposure to foods can increase familiarity and acceptance over time, helping people develop new likes and broaden their preferences.

- **Emotional associations with food:** Comfort foods linked to positive memories, or food avoidance due to negative experiences, heavily shape personal preferences.
- **Food neophobia:** This is the fear of new things. This is especially common in young children and can lead to hesitation or outright refusal to try unfamiliar foods.
- **Branding, packaging and advertising:** Marketing can strongly influence personal preferences, particularly for children and teenagers.
- **Cost:** Financial factors shape preference, as people often develop a liking for foods that are affordable or regularly available to them.
- **Ethical values:** Choosing vegetarian, vegan or sustainably-sourced options shape personal preferences based on individual beliefs.

To conclude, past negative experiences, allergies, textural or flavour preferences, and strong dislikes may limit the range of foods someone is willing to eat. Social trends may encourage people to follow diets or choose foods that are fashionable rather than nutritious. People may choose foods that support their goals or wellbeing, such as foods they believe give them energy or make them feel healthier.



### Religious beliefs

Religious beliefs shape food choices by providing rules, traditions and moral values that guide what people eat, when they eat, and how their food is prepared. These customs help individuals stay connected to their faith and cultural identity through everyday eating habits. These beliefs may involve avoiding certain foods, preparing them in a specific way, or eating particular foods during religious festivals and celebrations.

For example, in Islam, followers eat foods that are halal, meaning that they are permitted under Islamic law. Muslims avoid pork and alcohol completely, and meat must be slaughtered in a specific way. During the month of Ramadan, Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset, which changes when and how they eat. Many choose nutritious, filling foods such as dates, soups, and rice dishes when breaking their fast.



*Halal-certified meat*

In Judaism, food choices are shaped by kosher laws. Jewish people avoid pork and shellfish, and meat and dairy must not be eaten together. Foods must be prepared according to strict guidelines, which influences where they shop and what brands they buy.

Similarly, Hinduism often promotes a vegetarian or plant-based diet because many Hindus believe in ahimsa, which is the principle of non-violence towards living beings. As a result, many Hindus avoid beef, as cows are considered sacred.

In Christianity, food choices may change during religious periods like Lent, when some Christians avoid meat, sweets or favourite foods as a form of sacrifice.

Buddhists may choose vegetarian foods to show compassion for all living things; monks often follow a strictly meat-free diet.

Religious festivals also influence food choices. For example, during Diwali, Hindus often prepare traditional sweets such as laddoo and jalebi. During Eid, Muslims commonly enjoy dishes like biryani, kebabs, and sweet desserts after a month of fasting.

Overall, religious rules and dietary laws provide structure and encourage mindful eating habits, such as reduced alcohol intake and a deeper connection to community values. However, these requirements can also limit food options and make it difficult to source correctly-prepared items like halal or kosher products. Furthermore, while fasting periods promote discipline, they can disrupt regular eating patterns and present challenges for individuals with high energy needs or specific health conditions.

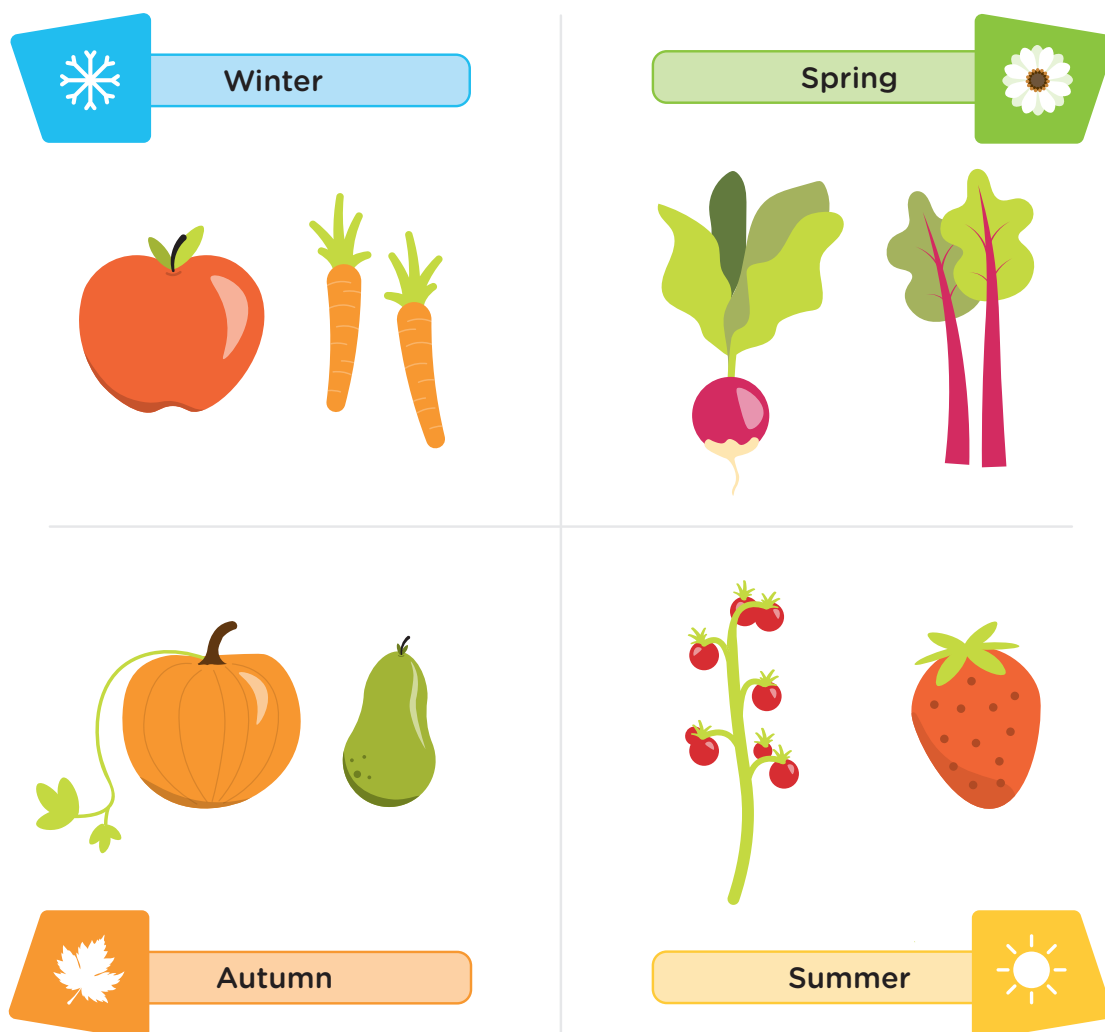
**For additional information on the influence of religious beliefs on food choices, see Section 1.2.2 in Unit 1.**



### Seasonality

Different foods grow at different times of the year. When foods are in season, they tend to be fresher, cheaper and better quality because they are grown locally and don't need to be imported from abroad. For example, butternut squash is in season during the autumn and early winter in the UK. At this time of year, it is often sold at a lower price, tastes sweeter, and is widely used in seasonal dishes like soups, roasted vegetable tray bakes and warm salads. However, during spring and summer, butternut squash becomes more expensive and less widely stocked, so many people choose other vegetables, for example courgettes or peppers, which are more widely available during this time of year.

Seasonality also influences the types of meals people cook throughout the year. During the colder months, root vegetables like carrots, parsnips and swedes are in season and commonly used in hearty dishes such as stews and casseroles. In contrast, during the summer seasonal foods like tomatoes, cucumbers and lettuce encourage people to prepare lighter meals such as salads and grilled vegetables. Seasonal traditions also shape choices; for instance, pumpkins are commonly eaten in the autumn due to harvest festivals and Halloween, and Brussel sprouts are typically eaten over the Christmas period.



*The seasonality of fresh produce across the seasons*



### The sensory qualities of food

The sensory qualities of food (for example taste, smell [aroma], texture, appearance, and even sound), play a major role in influencing what people choose to eat.



**Taste** is often the strongest factor, as individuals naturally prefer foods that match their flavour preferences. For example, someone who enjoys sweet flavours may choose fruits, desserts or sweetened cereals, while someone who prefers savoury foods might choose crisps, cheese or roasted meats.



**Smell** also affects food choice because pleasant aromas can make foods more appealing. The smell of freshly-baked bread or a spicy curry can encourage someone to choose those foods, while food with an unpleasant or strong odour may be avoided, even if it tastes good.



**Texture** and appearance also significantly shape food choices. People have individual preferences for textures; some like crunchy foods such as carrots, granola or crisps, while others prefer soft foods like mashed potatoes, yoghurt or ripe bananas. If a food's texture doesn't match a person's preference, they might choose not to eat it.



**Appearance** plays a role too; colourful, neatly-presented foods are often chosen over dull-looking or messy dishes. For example, a bright, vibrant salad with fresh vegetables is more appealing than one with wilted leaves or pale colours.



**Sound** even influences food choices; some people find the crunch of biting into a crisp apple or cracker satisfying, which makes those foods more desirable.



*Spaghetti bolognese, presented in two different ways.*

In summary, sensory appeal significantly influences food choices, as vibrant colours, pleasant aromas, and satisfying textures make meals more appetising. On the other hand, poorly-presented food often appears unappealing, discouraging selection. Including a variety of colours and textures makes eating more interesting and can encourage a more diverse diet.



### Shelf life and storage facilities

Shelf life determines how long a product will stay safe or good to eat, which makes it an important factor in choosing which foods to buy. People often check food labels and choose items based on how long they will last, especially if they want to avoid food waste or plan meals for the week. Foods with a long shelf life, such as dried pasta, tinned beans, rice or frozen vegetables, are appealing because they can be stored for months without spoiling. This makes them convenient for people who shop infrequently or have busy lifestyles. For example, a shopper might choose a tin of soup with a 'best before' date two years in advance because they know it will last for a long time, reducing the chance it will go to waste. Long lasting foods are also useful for budgeting (**see section 'Cost' above**), as households can bulk buy and store items until they are needed.



*Packaged fresh produce displaying clear 'use by' dates on their labels*

In contrast, foods with shorter shelf lives affect choices differently. Items such as fresh meat, fish, milk, and ready-to-eat salads often have 'use by' dates, which indicate the last day they are safe to eat. For example, if a pack of chicken breast has a 'use by' date for the following day, people are likely to buy it only if they plan to eat it soon; another option would be to freeze it immediately. Consumers should avoid ignoring 'use by' dates because eating food past this point can cause food poisoning.

The 'sell by' date and 'display until' date are for shops rather than consumers, but they still influence buying behaviours. If a supermarket reduces the price of bread or pastries nearing their 'sell by' date, shoppers may choose these items to save money, knowing they are still safe to eat as long as they are within the 'best before' or 'use by' period.

**For additional information on the influence of shelf life on food choices, see Section 2.2.4.**

#### ★ Key facts

- Low-risk foods have a longer shelf life.
- High-risk foods have a shorter shelf life.

A short shelf life also means that consumers may compare different types of the same food. For example, someone might choose long life (Ultra-Heat Treated: UHT) milk with a 'best before' date months away instead of fresh milk that expires in a few days. Similarly, they may pick frozen fish rather than fresh fish with a 'use by' date the next day, simply because it lasts longer. **Additional information on this can be found in section 1.1.4 The impact of food production methods on nutritional value in Unit 1.**

The storage facilities available to an individual can influence what foods they choose to buy. For example, households with a large freezer are more likely to purchase frozen foods or buy fresh items close to their 'use by' date and freeze them to extend their life. In contrast, someone with limited fridge or cupboard space may prefer foods with longer 'best before' dates, for example tinned goods, dried pasta or UHT milk, because they do not require refrigeration. **Additional information can be found in section 1.2.3 economic situations in Unit 1.**



### Top tip

Refer to 'use by' and 'sell by' dates in your assessment.

Overall, shelf life affects food choices by guiding shoppers toward foods that align with their schedules, fit their storage facilities, minimise waste, and reduce the risk of eating unsafe products.

## Socio-economic influences

Income, education, occupation and living conditions have a major impact on the food choices people make. One of the biggest influences is income (**see 'Cost' earlier in these notes**). Nutritional knowledge, access to shops, the types of shops available in the local environment, and time available all influence not only the food choices people make, but also their eating habits and long-term relationship with food.

Well-educated individuals with greater nutritional knowledge may choose foods based on health benefits and the information on labels, for example the nutritional profile or ingredients list. They may be more aware of the importance of balanced diets, portion control, and reducing sugar, salt and saturated fat. In contrast, people with less education or limited nutrition knowledge may be more influenced by convenience, taste or advertising. This can lead to selecting packaged or fast foods that are quick, familiar and affordable, even if they are less nutritious.



*A seminar on food nutritional values*

As explained earlier in the **'Lifestyles'** and **'Food availability and seasonality'** sections, as well as in **Unit 1 (1.2.3 How different situations affect nutritional needs)**, factors such as occupation, working patterns, transport, food availability and environments also heavily influence food choices.

Social class and cultural expectations also influence how people shop, where they eat, and what foods they consider normal or acceptable. For example, people from higher-income social groups may be more likely to shop at premium supermarkets, buy organic products, or eat at restaurants that serve fresh, high-quality ingredients. In contrast, families from lower-income backgrounds might rely more on budget supermarkets, value-range products, or convenience foods because they offer better affordability.

Cultural expectations also shape ideas about what types of foods are considered appropriate or traditional. Some cultures place importance on large family meals made from scratch, while others may favour quick, convenient foods due to busy lifestyles. Cultural norms can also dictate which foods are eaten on special occasions, which ingredients are essential, and which foods are avoided. As a result, both social class and cultural values influence everyday food choices by guiding what is viewed as typical, desirable or suitable within a community.



### Specific dietary needs or nutritional deficiencies

Specific dietary needs or nutritional requirements were explained in **Unit 1 (1.2.2 Nutritional needs of specific groups)**. The same principles apply to food choices. Individuals who are allergic or intolerant to specific foods or ingredients will choose not to consume those foods. Individuals who are deficient in specific nutrients should choose foods to help correct that deficiency (**refer to Unit 1: 1.2.1 Characteristics of unsatisfactory nutritional intake and 1.1.2 The functions of nutrients in the human body**).

The opposite applies to nutritional excesses. For these needs to be met, individuals need sufficient nutritional knowledge to make the right choices. For individuals with NCDs (Non-communicable diseases) resulting from unsatisfactory nutritional intake, developing that condition should lead to making food choices that stabilise and improve their condition. For example, individuals with high LDL cholesterol should choose foods low in LDL cholesterol and individuals with hypertension should choose foods low in salt.

However, even when an individual has a specific dietary need or medical condition that requires dietary changes, it can be difficult to follow the recommended guidance. One major reason is lack of understanding or awareness. For example, someone with high cholesterol may not fully understand which foods contain saturated fat, or they might believe that making small changes, such as switching to 'low-fat' snacks, is enough, even if their overall diet is still unhealthy. People with hypertension may not realise how much hidden salt is in processed foods, ready meals, or takeaway items, so they unintentionally continue consuming too much sodium.

Habit and personal preference also affect food choices in these situations because people often find it difficult to give up foods they enjoy, even if those foods worsen their condition. For example, a person with tooth decay may struggle to cut back on sugary snacks and fizzy drinks because they are used to having them daily. Someone with mild food allergies might find it challenging to avoid certain ingredients when eating out, especially if allergen information is unclear or if they feel embarrassed asking staff for help.



*A woman scratching an inflamed red rash on her stomach*

Cost and accessibility also often stop people from following recommended diets. Healthier options, such as fresh fruit, lean protein, or low-salt foods, can be more expensive than processed alternatives. A person with high cholesterol may be advised to eat more oily fish, nuts and fresh vegetables, but these foods can cost more than cheaper convenience foods, as can cholesterol-lowering foods. Someone with hypertension might struggle to buy low-salt alternatives if they live in an area with limited supermarket choice.

People with a busy job may rely on quick meals or takeaways, making it harder to follow a strict diet. For example, someone with a food intolerance may find it difficult to avoid cross-contamination when they frequently eat out or grab food on the go. Similarly, a person with diverticulitis might rely on ready meals because of time pressures, even though these meals are often low in fibre.

Emotional factors can also influence dietary behaviour. Comfort eating, stress, boredom or mental health conditions can make it harder for people to stick to recommended diets. For example, a person with tooth decay might reach for sweets during stress, even though they know it worsens their condition. People with chronic illness may feel overwhelmed by the number of lifestyle changes required and find it easier to stick with their usual habits, despite the consequences.

In conclusion, a lack of nutritional knowledge and deep-rooted habits often make it difficult for individuals to follow dietary guidance or manage health conditions. However, understanding specific allergies and nutrient needs empowers people to make safer, more intentional food choices that support their overall wellbeing.

# Acknowledgements

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