

Study Shows 'We Are What We Eat'

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What Canadians choose to put on the dinner table helps define who they are, according to a bi-coastal study by University of British Columbia and Dalhousie University researchers.

The three-year study is among the first to explore the complex meanings of food choices in ethnic communities, where there is above-average risk for heart disease and diabetes. The new information will contribute to better health promotion and nutrition education. It may have also unearthed a trend that may be tied to our national identity.

“Food and eating aren’t just about disease prevention, but relate to multiple dimensions of well-being,” says UBC nutrition Prof. Gwen Chapman. “Many families prioritize cultural and ethical concerns when deciding what goes into their grocery cart.”

The study, based on interviews with Canadians of European, Punjabi and African descents in British Columbia and Nova Scotia, finds that regardless of ethnicity, families find comfort in traditional foods.

Most Nova Scotians of African descent value what they call “black ways of eating,” often involving hot and spicy foods and “soul food” that “sticks to your ribs,” as a way of asserting their cultural heritage.

“Sitting down for a meal together is seen as promoting connection in the face of an unpredictable world,” says Prof. Brenda Beagan of Dalhousie’s School of Occupational Therapy.

Families of European descent often credit “meat and potatoes” meals for providing comfort, but tend to place higher value than other communities on “healthy foods” as defined by nutritional science.

In B.C. Punjabi families, many of whom are new immigrants to Canada, two separate meals are often prepared to accommodate elders who need dishes like roti, dahl and subjee to feel satisfied and younger family members who prefer to balance Indian and “Canadian” foods, the study shows.

In both Punjabi and African families, children often serve as agents of scientific nutritional information and the “health” of the community, family and its culture are equally valued.

Funded by the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR), the study also shows that Canadians are building consensus even in their kitchens.

Canadian women in all of the communities studied, who do most of the food shopping and cooking, cater to the needs of everyone in the family, preparing “consensus meals.” In comparison, earlier research in the U.S. and the U.K. showed women tended to cater to the tastes of men and children.

Provided by University of British Columbia

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