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Long-run Changes in Food Usage

Food Facts and Fancies

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Matters that concern the cost, availability, and selection of food items are of interest to everyone. We are all consumers. Some of us may also be involved in the production, processing, or marketing of food products. Still others furnish the goods and services that help to make up the vast and far-flung food industry. Expenditures for food make up a significant part of our living expenses. And the nutrients provided by what we eat go far in determining our state of health and physical well-being. Food is important.

The total per capita usage of food in the United States in recent years has been rather stable with each person consuming about 1,500 pounds per year. However, the make-up or "mix" of the different food items in the total varies from year to year, depending on weather conditions such as drouth, unseasonal freezes, or searing heat that can affect the short-run supply of certain food crops. Gradual changes in food preferences may also influence the long-run demand for certain food items.

Two observations are noted here.

1. The United States is a large country. Unfavorable growing conditions in one part of the country in a given year may be offset by normal, or favorable growing conditions elsewhere.

2. For most of our food crops or products, fairly acceptable substitutes are available. When a temporary short supply of a food item results in a sharp increase in its price, shoppers often shift their purchases to a substitute product.

Examination of U.S. per capita food consumption data over the past 20 years indicates that changes have taken place--and may be continuing. The table shows some examples of how certain food consumption indices have performed over the past 20 years. Eggs, animal fats, fresh potatoes, and coffee-tea-cocoa have shown declines in per capita usage. Meat and cereal products have shown little change. Poultry, fish, vegetable fats, processed potatoes, and sugar are examples of foods whose usage has increased. These changes in food usage may be related to changes that have occurred in our society. A few are mentioned, not necessarily in order of importance.

U.S. Per Capita Food Consumption Index
Selected Items
1967=100

	1960	1970	1975	1979*
Meat	72	104	101	100
Poultry	75	107	108	129
Fish	97	111	113	124
Eggs	104	97	87	88
Animal Fats	120	88	67	68
Vegetable Fats	80	119	134	149
Potatoes and Sweet Potatoes				
Fresh	95	108	109	117
Processed	134	95	91	85
	59	120	125	147
Cereal Products	103	98	96	104
Sugar	96	105	104	118
Coffee, Tea, Cocoa	98	93	87	84

*Preliminary
Source: National Food Review, Fall 1980

1. The trend toward more use of machines and less hand labor. This trend is evident in mining, manufacturing, transportation and agriculture, as well as in many service activities. As more manual labor is replaced with power-driven machines, there is probably less need for high-energy nutrients such as fats, carbohydrates, and starches in our diets. Persons who work or spend time in low-temperature environments utilize more energy from food sources or body stores, than do those exposed to warm surroundings. How we live, work, and play does influence what and how much we eat.

2. The growth in the numbers of women employed outside the home. This trend results in less time for the homemaker to spend in the kitchen, and may result in increased household income. Either or both of these effects can change the pattern of food expenditures by the family.

3. Growth in the consumption of food outside the home. Expansion of school lunch programs, establishment of in-plant food service facilities, the almost universal coffee or lunch break, and food services for senior citizens are some examples of what has happened. It is estimated that upwards of 25 percent of the food eaten away from home is provided by so-called "fast food" establishments. With their standardized and sometimes limited menus and their emphasis on speedy preparation and service, these operators exercise considerable influence upon food usage patterns.

4. Growth in the layman's knowledge of nutrition. Nutrition education is an on-going process. Many of us select food items on the basis of personal preference, taste, hunger, or habit. Increased knowledge of nutrition principles seems likely to exert some influence on the items we place in our cart at the supermarket.

5. The reduction in time spent in the home kitchen has helped provide wider markets for prepared or further-processed foods. T.V. dinners, cake, and other pastry mixes, and a multitude of snack foods are widely used. Pre-

cooked meat, poultry, and fish portions are offered for those who want "heat and serve" main course foods. Some writers have described the provision of these further processing features as examples of "built-in maid service".

Policies Affecting Food Usage

Future public policy developments could have important impacts on food costs and choices. Some possible examples: Trade. Embargos, import duties, international good will, or lack of it, and the degree to which food, fertilizer, and machinery are permitted to flow in foreign trade will affect our food supply. Energy. Fossil fuel costs, supplies, and usage are in a state of turmoil. Only the fearless person would venture a forecast and its accuracy would surely be questioned. Will we develop a heavily subsidized alcohol fuel industry? If so, how will this affect our supplies of milk, meat, and eggs?

New Crops and/or Products. Soybeans and sunflowers are examples of crops that have become more widely utilized in recent years. Progress is still being made in soybean utilization for industrial, food, and feed applications. Experience in sunflower utilization would appear to be only well begun.

Changes in food consumption patterns have occurred and are likely to continue. The next twenty years should be interesting to watch.

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