

# Teacher-to-Teacher

## Adolescents' Attitudes Toward Their Diets

David R. Stronck  
University of Victoria  
Victoria, British Columbia  
Canada V8W 2Y2

In February, 1980, the U.S. Department of Agriculture joined with the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in publishing the little booklet *Nutrition and Your Health: Dietary Guidelines for Americans* (1980). The following seven guidelines were presented:

1. Eat a variety of foods.
2. Maintain ideal weight.
3. Avoid too much fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol.
4. Eat foods with adequate starch and fiber.
5. Avoid too much sugar.
6. Avoid too much sodium.
7. If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation.

These guidelines were issued because many Americans are eating too much junk food—that is, foods dominated by excessive sugar, fat, and salt. Few Americans recognize the dangers of possible deficiencies in vitamins and minerals from their highly processed foods. These assertions justifying the need for the *Dietary Guidelines* probably can be supported by any teacher who takes about ten minutes to administer a simple questionnaire to the students. The questionnaire that I prepared for adolescents appears in table 1. This questionnaire of ten items was completed by a total of 490 students in

grades 8, 9, and 10. Most of these students were white, middle-class adolescents in a suburban school. There was no prior discussion of the topics before all of these students completed the questionnaire on the same day at the same time.

The Nutrition Questionnaire used the Likert Scale, which provided five possible responses to each statement:

- (1) I strongly agree; (2) I somewhat agree; (3) I don't know how to answer; (4) I somewhat disagree; and (5) I strongly disagree.

In response to the first item, nearly half (48.2%) of the students responded that they either "strongly" or "somewhat" agreed that they are eating too much junk food. Yet, 45.6% disagreed with the first statement to some degree. A strong majority of the students is convinced that the quality of their food has an effect on their health and their appearance. In response to the second statement of the questionnaire, 48.8% strongly agree that the food they eat affects their health. A total of 73.6% agreed with the statement for the strongest response to any item of the questionnaire; only 19.3% disagreed. Similarly, 61.7% agreed with the statement of the third item: "The food I eat will affect my future health." The younger students in

grade eight were the least convinced that their diet would affect their future.

The fourth item was "The food I eat affects how I look." Again a strong majority of 60.9% agreed. At all grade levels, the girls were significantly more in agreement than the boys on items 2, 3, and 4. Probably the girls are demonstrating both greater maturity and better knowledge of foods. Adolescent girls often avoid junk food to prevent overweight.

The responses to the first four items reveal a strong recognition of the dangers of junk food. Many teenagers clearly believe they will suffer skin blemishes when they eat too much sugar. Our society has some recognition of harmful foods that should be avoided. In general, I have found adolescents relatively eager to learn more about foods to improve their health.

On the other hand, few adolescents are aware of the more subtle dangers from deficiencies in their diet. There is the general assumption that a varied diet will provide adequate nutrients of all types. Item 5 was "I eat a balanced healthful diet." A strong majority at 70.4% either strongly or somewhat agreed. This high level of agreement partially contradicts the 48.2% who responded in item 1 that they are eating

TABLE 1. Percentages of Students Expressing Each Attitude Toward Statements on Nutrition. (N = 490 Students)

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Don't Know</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	
1. I eat too much "junk food" (for example, popcorn, candy bars, and pop).	16.2	31.0	7.1	28.6	17.0	
2. The food I eat affects my health.	48.8	24.8	7.1	8.3	11.0	*
3. The food I eat will affect my future health.	37.0	24.7	14.5	11.7	12.1	* **
4. The food I eat affects how I look.	33.5	27.4	16.1	11.4	11.6	* **
5. I eat a balanced healthful diet.	19.6	51.2	9.2	14.7	5.3	
6. I eat too little of the best food (for example, fresh fruits, vegetables, and milk).	5.5	19.0	4.5	34.4	36.6	
7. When I choose foods, I often think about how good each food is for me.	7.5	28.5	8.4	28.9	26.7	*
8. I am willing to cut out foods that are not good for me.	14.8	22.6	9.1	28.0	25.4	* **
9. I try to learn to like healthful foods.	16.0	44.6	11.0	16.6	11.9	*
10. The food I eat affects my work in school.	9.9	14.0	10.8	21.1	44.2	

\* Highly significant differences at the 0.5% level of confidence between the sexes. The girls in all grades had lower scores (more positive agreement) than the boys with the exception of grade 8 on question 3 where there was no significant difference.

\*\* Highly significant differences at the 1.0% level of confidence among the three grades of 8, 9, and 10. The tenth graders consistently had the lowest scores (most positive agreement) with each question. There were no significant differences between the eighth graders and the ninth graders on questions 3 and 4.

too much junk food. Perhaps 20% of adolescents are confused about the forty different essential nutrients needed for our survival (Williams 1977). Probably they assume that all essential nutrients are found in the American diet, even the junk food diet.

A significant minority (20.0%) observed that they do not eat a "balanced healthful diet." Similarly on item 6, 24.5% of these students believe that they eat too little of the "best foods, for example, fresh fruits, vegetables, and milk." Through interviews, teachers have discovered that most students are satisfied with their diets if they drink milk frequently and eat some vegetables at least once each day. Perhaps the diet of one fifth of the students in this survey is rather grossly deficient.

Item 7 seeks to measure the students' general level of concern over the quality of their food by posing this statement: "When I choose foods, I often think about how good each food is for me." A total of 55.6% rarely or never think about the quality of their food as expressed by 26.7% strongly disagreeing with item 7 and 28.9% somewhat disagreeing. The girls in all three grades were significantly more aware of their food selections than were the boys. The responses to this item indicate that the majority of these adolescents do not seem to rank the nutritional quality of food as one of their important interests. Because girls are usually more involved in buying and preparing foods, their concern and knowledge are superior to that of the boys.

When we recognize that approximately half of these students responded in item 1 that they are eating too much junk food, the data on item 8 are disappointing. A majority of the students (53.4%) replied that they are not willing "to cut out foods that are not good" for them. On the other hand, 37.4% showed willingness. Again, the girls were significantly more positive in their attitudes. Moreover, the older students were more willing to change than the younger students. Perhaps the eighth-grade boys were most negative simply because they were the most ignorant about nutritional problems. Probably some of the negative attitudes arise from a demand for freedom of choice without possible restrictions imposed by the school on vending machines.

Responses to item 9 were en-

couraging; 60.6% indicated a willingness to "try to learn to like healthful foods." The girls were significantly more willing to try new foods. Unfortunately 28.5% were not willing to try. Apparently many persons form rather fixed eating habits in their early years of life.

The last item is the following: "The food I eat affects my work in school." Only 23.9% agreed with this statement. Apparently few students have recognized a change in their own behavior on the basis of their diet.

In recent years, many Americans have been advocating a greater emphasis on nutrition education

(Stronck 1976; Richmond 1979). Student responses to this questionnaire demonstrate some urgency in providing such instruction. Many students seem to lack enough information to make intelligent judgments about food selection. There is ignorance concerning the relationships between diet and health. Some have firm attitudes resisting change toward a healthier diet. Nevertheless, one of the most important items which everyone needs to learn well is how to select an appropriate diet. Our instruction in biology will become more relevant when we recognize such real needs of the students.

## References

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