

Lower Socioeconomic Status Linked to an Unhealthy Diet

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People with lower levels of education and income have less healthy dietary habits, partly because of their higher priority for price and familiarity, and their lower priority for health as a motive for food purchase. Price reduction of foods such as fruits and vegetables might therefore be an effective strategy for diet improvement, but the potential of different pricing strategies needs further research. These are the conclusions of researchers from the Departments of Social Research and Public Health of the University of Helsinki, and the Department of Chronic Disease Prevention of the Finnish National Institute for Health and Welfare.

A low socio-economic status (SES) is related to unhealthy dietary habits; less educated people with a low income tend to consume more energy-dense food whereas their higher SES counterparts have a higher fruit and vegetable intake. This association between SES and the healthiness of the diet is not fully understood yet but investigating the motives underlying food choice might provide more insight.

In a Finnish population sample of 1691 men and 2059 women, aged 24-65 years (National Cardiovascular Risk Factor Survey, FINRISK), researchers have examined both 'relative' and 'absolute' importance of six distinctive motives of food choice (health, pleasure, ethicality, convenience, price and familiarity) to explain the socio-economic differences in both fruit & vegetable and energy-dense food intake. A novelty of this study was the analysis of individual motive priorities (relative motives) rather than only the absolute ratings of single motives (absolute motives). According to the authors, these relative measures better reflect the complexity of the motive structure of food choice.

People's motives for food selection were assessed by means of a Food Choice Questionnaire in which they were asked to rate statements that reflect the six different motivations: "It is important to me that the food I eat on a typical day is ... low in fat (example for a health motive)/ easy to prepare (example for a convenience motive)/tastes good (example of a pleasure motive)" etc. The relative importance was then derived by dividing the participant's absolute rating of the motives by his/her mean score on all motives. The ratings of the individual food choice motives were then put into relation with the consumption data for fruits & vegetables and energy-dense foods, and the socio-demographic statistics for educational attainment and household income.

The study outcomes confirmed earlier findings associating a low SES with lower fruit/vegetable intake. Higher education was related to lower consumption of energy-dense foods. For participants with low levels of education and income, price and familiarity were important (absolute and relative) drivers for food selection, whereas a higher income was related to a higher relative importance of individual health considerations. 'Healthy' foods such as fruits & vegetables are often (perceived to be) more expensive and price is considered a barrier for people with less buying power. Staying with 'familiar' food might be driven by the fact that people with a lower SES do not want to take the risk of wasting when trying a new food. On the other hand, people with a higher SES can afford to try something new and thereby lose their strong attachment to traditional habits.



In line with previous research, the authors show that education groups (lower vs. higher SES) can differ in the (absolute and relative) importance they place on food choice motives and that this underlying relationship, in turn, may influence dietary behaviour with regards to fruit & vegetable but also energy-dense food consumption. However, the measured relative food choice motives only partly explain this SES influence and additional factors related to dietary intake are suggested, including access to and availability of food. As such it can be noted that individual priorities best help explain consumption behaviour when seen in the right food environment context.

For further information:

[Konttinen H et al. \(2012\) Socio-economic disparities in the consumption of vegetables, fruit and energy-dense foods: the role of motive priorities. Public Health Nutrition, Available on CJO2012 doi:10.1017/S1368980012003540.](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980012003540)