
NUTRI-NET NEWS

October 1997

MEDIA MATTERS

This newsletter is a service of the Nutrition Education Network of Wisconsin. It is designed to enhance coordination and communication among agencies and organizations that educate Wisconsin's low income individuals and families about nutrition and food.

Nutri-Net News shares brief information about programs and materials that support healthful and enjoyable eating.

Nutrition Trends Survey

The American Dietetic Association's September 3 release of the results of their biennial survey of Americans' behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge related to food, nutrition and health has been making the media rounds. Some of their key findings:

- Most Americans (79%) believe nutrition impacts their health, yet only four in ten (39%) say they are doing all they can to eat healthfully. Biggest perceived barriers to eating well include the fear of giving up foods (40%), confusion or frustration over nutrition studies and reports (23%), and the belief that a balanced diet takes too much time (21%).
- Seven in ten Americans (72%) still believe that foods are either "good" or "bad" -- one of the biggest food myths and a major source of consumer confusion.
- Women (51%) more than men (32%) perceive the Food Guide Pyramid to be useful in helping to make food choices.
- Seven in ten Americans (72%) believe that exercise and physical activity are as important as a nutritious eating plan to good

health, only 47% of men and 40% of women say they make an effort to get regular physical activity.

- The number of people (28%) who say they skip meals "very often" or "quite a bit" is up from 21% in 1995, suggesting this may be a growing trend.
- Most Americans (67%) count on television newscasts as their major source for nutrition information, but few (24%) judged it to be "very valuable."

(Contact : The American Dietetic Association, 800-877-1600, for the executive summary of *Nutrition Trends Survey 1997*.)

Subscription Information

Nutri-Net News is published quarterly. It can be sent to you by fax, mail or e-mail.

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TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Food Choices of Low Income Families

Understanding the Food Choices of Low-Income Families summarizes the results of a three-year research effort by USDA in which the investigators studied existing survey data and, in addition, conducted 28 focus groups in six major cities.

Findings from the Analysis of Survey Data:

- Food use patterns of the few households that both kept within the Thrifty Food Plan budget and provided at least the RDA were quite different from the food use patterns of other households. This small group spent a larger share of its food dollar on grains, fruit, vegetables, and milk and a smaller share on meat and the “other foods” category.
- More than two thirds were aware of health problems related to overweight, high fat intake and cholesterol. Half or less said they knew about problems relating to insufficient fiber, calcium, iron, or excess saturated fats.

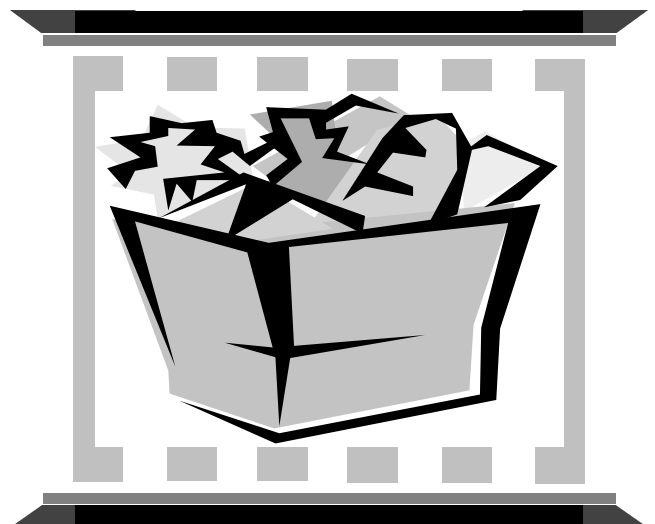
Focus Group Findings:

- Food price is the most important consideration in making choices.
- The time of month food stamp recipients choose to shop, the frequency of their shopping, and their use of “convenience” foods limit their ability to purchase a low-cost diet. African American focus group participants were most likely to report doing their major shopping once a month at major supermarkets, usually right after receiving their food stamp allotment. (Hispanic and white non-Hispanic respondents shop more frequently.) African

Americans were also more able than their white counterparts to keep food expenditures at or below the TFP. These data suggest frequent shopping may lead to impulse buying and higher food expenditures.

- Families often do not have regular meals together. In most homes, family members are expected to prepare food for themselves at breakfast and lunch.
- Participants rely heavily on their children’s food preferences and their “special” food requests in choosing foods. Respondents in all ethnic groups agreed it does not make sense to purchase food that children will not eat. Female respondents in all groups said their own taste and product preferences had less influence on food choices than those of other family members.
- Ethnic and cultural traditions are strong factors in food choice and meal preparation, particularly for African American and Hispanic food stamp recipients. Cultural tradition and the preferences of family members influence food stamp participants to continue serving high-fat meat products and other traditional foods.

(Contact: Pat McKinney, 703-305-2126, FAX: 703-305-2576, e-mail: pat_mckinney@fcs.usda.gov for *Understanding the Food Choices of Low Income Families: Summary of Findings*.)



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Evaluating Nutrition Education

Proceedings of a February 1997 USDA symposium on evaluation of nutrition education and promotion were released this summer. Including presentations from some of the nation's top thinkers in social marketing, nutrition education, communications theory and evaluation, the 61-page professional reference has a wealth of background on evaluation and behavior change theory. Major themes about developing and evaluating behavior-focused nutrition education programs using models appropriate for population settings are summarized below:

1. Set appropriate objectives and manage expectations. Nutrition education usually involves trying to change complex behaviors. Nutrition educators need to think through the type of intervention they will be doing before they set objectives. As one speaker noted, "the effect size for clinical interventions is large and hopefully fast. In a public health intervention, it's small, and at best, it's gradual." Yet nutrition and health educators often set themselves up to fail by setting objectives for public health interventions that demand big changes in behavior very quickly. In comparison, private marketers (who operate in the same environment as public health interventions) declare success with much smaller changes than health educators expect to make. A private sector objective might be increasing sales by 2 or 3 percent, compared to a public health objective of cutting the smoking rate in half.
2. Define meaningful, measurable outcomes. Often the outcomes selected for nutrition education programs are too global to meaningfully measure a program's effect, or to be measured with any accuracy. Identifying and measuring intermediate variables in addition to outcomes is often crucial to measuring progress. Behavior change can take a long time, frequently longer than the evaluation period, and intermediate variables help determine if progress is being made. Intermediate variables include anything that could influence the behavior change, such as interpersonal, environmental, accessibility, and availability factors.
3. Design interventions using appropriate theoretical models -- and design evaluations using the same models. A 1995 FCS sponsored review of the nutrition education literature found that nutrition education "works" when it is based on theory and has behavior change as a goal. Individual, social and environmental factors all play roles in behavior change, and interventions that influence all these factors are most likely to be successful.
 - The knowledge-attitude-behavior model, used frequently with nutrition education programs, has significant deficiencies. It does not account for any variable outside the individual, e.g., environmental factors. Research has not shown that it is necessary to change attitudes to change behavior -- in fact, sometimes behavior changes first. Also, the model doesn't differentiate between types of knowledge, i.e., "how-to" versus motivational knowledge.
 - Theoretical models appropriate for nutrition education include: 1.) stages of change, 2.) social learning theory, 3.) the health belief model, and 4.) diffusion of innovations. Often, some combination of these models should be used to develop successful programs.
4. Include both formative and process evaluation activities. Frequently, outcome evaluation is the only type of evaluation used for nutrition education efforts. Many speakers believed that formative and process evaluation are critical to the development and implementation of successful programs. If resources are limited, they recommend putting formative and process evaluation first. (In a flawed program, outcome evaluators may conclude the intervention did not work, when in fact the materials needed fine-tuning or the delivery strategies needed revision.)

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- Formative research and evaluation guarantee the best possible program by identifying appropriate target audiences and ensuring program messages are relevant to them. Formative evaluation includes many aspects of program development: target audience selection, message testing, market testing, etc.
- Process evaluation was emphasized because it allows ongoing monitoring of programs and enables timely revisions. Process evaluation activities include tracking participation in program events,

tracking media coverage, and tracking progress made by change agents, e.g., such as coalition members. (Contact: Pat McKinney (see above) for *Charting the Course for Evaluation: How Do We Measure the Success of Nutrition Education and Promotion in Food Assistance Programs? Summary of Proceedings.*)

NETWORK UPDATE

The Nutrition Education Network is in the process of developing an assessment instrument to determine the nutrition education needs of Wisconsin's low income individuals and families. A draft framework on needs assessment questions for nutrition programming was discussed and revised to meet group consensus at the last Network meeting in July. Questions revolved around demographics, income/poverty data, food security data, nutritional health data, and attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors data. Plans are for the final needs assessment document to be a web site that will include summaries of research, abstracts of studies, links to data sources, and tools to assess the needs of Wisconsin's low income population.

Future objectives the Network plans to address are as follows:

- Identify evaluation criteria for determining whether programs' curricular materials address population needs.
- Complete resource inventory of currently used curricular materials which meet the evaluation criteria.
- Assemble recommended curricular materials into a meta-curriculum.
- Identify any gaps or weaknesses in meta-curriculum and formulate strategies to address those gaps.
- Incorporate the findings of the Network into the nutrition education plans of members' programs.
- Present Network findings at the Wisconsin Nutrition Education Conference in Spring 1999.

OUR MISSION:

The Nutrition Education Network of Wisconsin coordinates nutrition education programs to promote healthful and enjoyable eating so that Wisconsin's low income individuals and families receive consistent, positive, relevant, accurate, and effective nutrition messages.

Nutri-Net News is one way that the Network shares information and resources to accomplish this mission.

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