

FOOD LITERACY



AN ADDED VALUE FOR HEALTH

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WHAT IS FOOD LITERACY?

Based on Health Literacy concept "...the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions" (1), Food Literacy can be considered as a set of inter-related competencies, skills and abilities regarding a functional, relational and critical level: to know, to do, to sense, to want, to be.

Food Literacy includes a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes concentrated into six domains: skills and behaviours (physical actions or abilities involving food), food/health choices (actions associated with informed choices around food use), culture (societal aspect of food), knowledge (ability to understand and seek information about food), emotions (the influence of attitudes and motivation), and food systems (the ability to understand the complexity of food system) (2).

The most cited definition (3) describes Food Literacy as "...the scaffolding that empowers individuals, households, communities or nations to protect diet quality through change and strengthen dietary resilience over time. It is composed of a collection of inter-related knowledge, skills and behaviours required to plan, manage, select, prepare and eat food to meet needs and determine intake". These elements represent the key factors – not at all easy and simple to translate in actions in everyday life that pragmatically influence eating habits and, consequently, health and well-being.

The case for action on food literacy

Many surveys underline the poor quality of diet, the excessive consumption of processed convenience foods (such as take-away or ready-to-eat dishes) also in home practice and the "culinary transition" characterized by loss of the food cultures and by deficit of fundamental competencies to travel through complex food environments.

In the WHO European Region two thirds of premature deaths are caused by four major NCDs (cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancers and chronic respiratory disease) and by other major risk factors (alcohol use, unhealthy diets, physical inactivity, hypertension, obesity and environmental factors), and it is estimated that at least 80% of all heart disease, stroke and diabetes and 40% of cancer could be prevented.

Food literacy has been assumed to be one of the most considerable factors to evaluate the effectiveness of public health nutrition policy interventions (Macdiarmid, et al., 2011) and, at the same, food literacy is depicted as a crucial determinant of health improvement, environmental sustainability, and social equity.

Food literacy refers to the ways in which people interpret and implement healthy eating:

- Adequate food literacy has been argued to contribute to the enhancement of the individual psycho-physical well-being through appropriate food choices. (4)
- Inadequate food literacy has been depicted as a causal factor of negative consumer behaviours within the food system. In particular, it has been associated with unwillingness to promote a positive change in attitudes and perceptions toward food, poor ability to deal with food-related information, confusion in selecting and consuming food (5) and food wastage.
- Food Literacy concept has also been debated as a factor to improve psycho-physical wellbeing at individual and population level



- Promoting food literacy is a major imperative that every dietitian, not only in clinical but also in community and population settings, must be aware of.
- Every dietitian should be specifically trained in health and food communications skills, to improve communication with patients and to help people to implement their own food skills, abilities and knowledge.





FOOD LITERACY AND HEALTH: KEY CONCEPTS

- Food Literacy concerns "the everyday practicalities associated with navigating the food system and using it to ensure a regular food intake that is consistent with nutritional recommendations" (3)
- An indirect relationship connects Food Literacy and nutrition through three mechanisms: security, choice, and pleasure
- Food Literacy concept has also been debated as factor to improve "a positive psychological, physical, emotional, and social relationship with food at both individual and societal levels" (5)

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Key concepts for health and education



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Further reading:

Society and the Environment, 2016