

The following points of information and views are based on my experience as a teacher of Home Economics.

1. In a modern 'rushed' society, the skill of cooking has lost its 'currency'. Too few people, including parents/guardians of children have the necessary skills to make healthy nutritious meals for their children on a continuous basis.
2. Convenient 'fast food' is too readily available. These foodstuffs include ingredients, salt, fat or sugar which add unnecessary 'energy' or kilo calories to the diet. Diseases including Diabetes 2, 'fatty liver' disease, Coronary Heart disease and certain cancers are associated with 'fast food' diets.
3. The concept of eating meals at a table in the company of other people is no longer a daily practice, as a result many adults and children 'graze', eating while: travelling, to allay boredom, watching TV, when using 'mobile phones' etc. This behaviour leads to 'mindless' eating.
4. A society which has become urbanised quickly, as Ireland has over the last four decades, has lost its connection with growing food. Simple foods such as lettuce, summer tomatoes, potatoes, rhubarb etc are no longer grown by many people. With this loss of knowledge, a corresponding dependence on supermarket shopping is now the norm. Most people display minimal understanding of seasonality and sustainable practices when choosing food to buy. Our population is largely at the 'mercy' of marketing when it comes to choosing what foods will be purchased to feed ourselves and our families.

POSSIBLE STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE NUTRITIONAL STATUS OF CHILDREN

1. EDUCATION. Currently too few adolescents learn how to cook in school (2017 Junior Certificate, just 36.4% of candidates took Home Economics as a subject, the majority of this cohort were girls). A strategy to: (i) increase the number of students learning how to cook in school needs to be implemented

(ii) a small group of people with relevant background knowledge needs to be brought together to plan a short programme of cookery skills for parents (Darina Allen, Sr Stanislaus Kennedy, Professor Joseph O'Shea, are suitable candidates).

(iii) A short programme where adults, particularly parents 'to be' could be taught the basics (Brown Soda Bread, Soup & Broth, Roasted Root Vegetables, simple Beef & Lamb Stews, Fruit Crumbles etc). A majority of our 2nd. Level schools have class room kitchens, these could be accessed in the evenings, during holiday periods etc for such practical cookery skills to be taught. Such an initiative is worth 'piloting'.

2. TAXES & TARRIFS. All food which has been fried in oil and made available for sale, must have a tax imposed, to offset the medical costs associated with high fat diets.

(ii) Tax 'breaks' could act as incentive to 'outlets' who sell food products that are not fried in oil.

3. PUBLIC AWARENESS CAMPAIGN. To remind people of the benefits of:

Eating a Breakfast before leaving home in the morning (the age-old mantra to 'breakfast like a king, lunch like a prince and dine like a pauper' has an essential message for health!)

Not eating 'mindlessly' or giving children food to eat while travelling, instead promoting a concept of eating at table, to enjoy the process of eating as a 'mindful' activity.

4. GOVERNMENT LEADING BY EXAMPLE.

All housing units must prioritise space for cooking and eating food at a table.

Future housing projects should incorporate small community gardens growing apple trees, rhubarb and soft fruit such as raspberries and blackcurrants.

Fried food should not be served to individuals who work in State hospitals, schools, army barracks, navy personnel, prison services, administration services etc.

Fried foods, and certain 'convenience' foods should never be served to patients in hospitals, instead menus should concentrate on freshly produced meals, using Irish Bord Bia approved ingredients. The same policy should apply to pupils in schools, students in Third Level colleges etc.