

Eating well is also a way of ensuring nutrition security

The importance of *eating well* is the central theme of this edition. The impacts of eating habits on health and the quality of life of populations at different stages of life are examined from different perspectives.

“Eating well” arises as a relevant theme at a time when malnutrition and food (in)security are once again highly crucial issues in the Brazilian political and social scenario.

But what does eating well mean? Obviously, eating well can acquire several meanings depending on the social, economic, and historical contexts. However, there is no doubt that the minimum requirement for good nutrition is based on food and nutrition security. This concept of necessity involves the consumption of nutrients in adequate quantity and quality, to ensure the proper functioning of the body, promote the proper growth and development of children and adolescents, and provide the necessary resources to maintain the health and vitality of adults and the elderly.

Nutrition security goes beyond the simple availability of food, as it also encompasses people’s ability to obtain food to meet their individual and collective needs regularly and consistently.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Brazil was already facing significant nutritional inequalities. However, Brazil reached the target of the Millennium Development Goals¹ of halving the prevalence of malnutrition in 2014 and, for the first time, was removed from the “Hunger Map”². Nonetheless, the levels of impoverishment of the population increased significantly during the pandemic. Millions of Brazilians were pushed towards the poverty line or into extreme poverty.

In 2022, the II National Survey on Food Insecurity in the Context of the Pandemic³ (II VIGISAN) revealed that 33.1 million people had no guarantee of sustenance. At the end of the first year of the pandemic, in 2020, that number was 19.1 million people. This represented a further 14 million Brazilians suffering from hunger in less than 2 years. According to the study, more than half (58.7%) of the Brazilian population is at risk of food insecurity to some degree, and between 14 and 17% are hungry or starving.

It was not the shortage of food that led to this serious scenario. Rising unemployment, the health crisis, political ineptitude, the dismantling of social policies, declining household incomes, disruption of supply chains and, lastly, the war in Ukraine have had a direct and dramatic impact on the ability of families to ensure adequate minimum nutrition. And, perversely, the price of fresh foods, such as fruits, greens, vegetables, rice and beans, have risen significantly and are losing space on the table to ultra-processed products (instant noodles, sausages, cookies, etc.), condemning the most vulnerable population to a diet very poor in nutrients and high in calories, sodium and saturated fats.

This phenomenon is not new and its impact on public health is well known. But the escalation of the crisis and the regression to the levels of the 1990s needs to be the scope of close attention and effective, immediate, and consistent public policies. Chronic hunger is directly related to several health problems, including delayed child growth, low birth weight, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes. Food insecurity is also associated with mental disorders such as anxiety and depression, due to the dramatic stress caused by the uncertainty of food availability.

Providing access to “eating well” means transforming the future, especially for most Brazilian children – born into hunger and retrogression. For this reason, food security is today one of the most relevant agendas of public health!

Miryam de Souza Minayo (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3521-3113>)¹

¹ Centro de Relações Internacionais em Saúde, Fundação Oswaldo Cruz. Rio de Janeiro RJ Brasil.

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