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UWC: Affordability shapes SA people's food choices

a University of the Western Cape (UWC) study has found that many South Africans decide what to put on their dinner table based on affordability, household needs and what is available rather than nutritional value.

The study examined food choices in Worcester in the Western Cape, Stutterheim in the Eastern Cape and Esikhawini in KwaZulu-Natal.

HEALTH MATTERS, BUT OFTEN COMES SECOND

The study, published in the *South African Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, involved almost 70 adults. Many participants were unemployed or depended on social grants.

Researchers, including UWC dietetics and nutrition lecturer Dr Nazeela Sayed and department head Prof Rina Swart, found that participants generally understood the benefits of healthy eating. However, health was seldom the deciding factor when food was bought.

People weighed health considerations against price, convenience, transport costs and the distance to shops.

One participant described the reality of household budgeting: "In our household we do not just buy food. Rather, we check the price of each food item first to see how much it costs."

FAMILY PREFERENCES AND SPECIALS

Household members also played a major role in food decisions. Participants often chose meals that would satisfy children, partners and other relatives, while ensuring everyone had enough to eat.

Healthy alternatives were sometimes overlooked if they were considered too expensive, unfamiliar or unlikely to appeal to the whole family.

Participants identified whole grains, fruit, vegetables, legumes, lean protein and minimally processed foods as healthy. Fried foods, sugary drinks, fast food, refined carbohydrates and products high in fat and salt were generally viewed as unhealthy.

Some healthy options, including leafy vegetables, legumes and chicken liver, were avoided because people were unsure how to prepare them in an appealing way.

Promotions and advertising also affected purchasing decisions. Price-conscious consumers said they relied on specials and compared prices weekly or monthly, depending on their income.

"We watch the specials, we live on specials," one participant said. "We compare it monthly or weekly, depending on what our income is."

Cooking at home was viewed as cheaper than buying ready-made meals. Shops close to home or work were also preferred because they reduced transport expenses.

Snacks and treats, including yoghurt, were often regarded as luxuries.



Lead author of the study Dr Nazeela Sayed

Participants said they would rather spend money on essentials such as flour. Products with a longer shelf life were also more attractive than foods that spoiled quickly.

CONVENIENCE AND CONCERNS AT SPAZA SHOPS

Local spaza shops were valued for their proximity and convenience. Some also allowed customers to buy on credit.

However, participants raised concerns about the freshness and expiry dates of some products sold at these stores.

The researchers cautioned that the findings may not apply to all South African communities, but noted the study offered important insight into how people in urban areas made food choices under financial pressure.

They recommended closer cooperation among government, retailers, the food industry and other stakeholders to improve access to healthier food.

Healthier products should be promoted more actively, while marketing of unhealthy options should be reduced. They added that retail changes should form part of wider public-health efforts to create a healthier food environment.