Food and health related habits, attitudes, and lifestyles of Swedish adolescents

Focus group discussions in Gothenburg

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Summary

Food plays an important role in peoples’ health and well being. However, if an individual’s intake of energy exceeds the energy expenditure, the risk of becoming overweight or obese increases. Today there is a clear trend in many countries that populations are becoming more overweight or obese, children and adolescents as well as adults. This is also true in Sweden.

The present investigation is a part of the extensive EU-funded project Helena – Healthy Lifestyle in Europe by Nutrition in Adolescence, which is targeted at European adolescents in the ages of 13 – 16 years. The project gathers scientists from different disciplines in studies ranging from genetic coding of obesity to consumer acceptance of healthy foods.

This report summarises the results of eight focus group discussions held in November 2005 in Gothenburg, Sweden. Similar studies were also carried out in Belgium, England, Hungary and Spain. The aim of the focus group discussions was to gather and compare qualitative information on topics such as adolescents’ food habits, food attitudes, lifestyle and information sources, particularly in relation to health. The results will also be used to formulate questions for a large pan-European quantitative study that will be carried out within the Helena project.

The main findings are:

- While it is most common that adolescents eat breakfast before going to school it is still not unusual for them to skip breakfast because of a lack of time, especially among older adolescents.
- Adolescents most commonly have a hot lunch served at school, which usually includes several options; however, if the food is not liked, other alternatives are chosen.
- Adolescents most commonly have a family dinner, prepared by parent(s) in the evening of school days.
- Adolescents commonly eat snacks when they come home from school. Typical snacks are sandwiches, buns/cakes, fruit, milk, yoghurt and sweets.
- The choice of breakfast foods on school days is influenced mainly by taste, habits and the need to be alert at school. Health is not considered to any great extent.
- The food served at the school canteen has a major influence on the choice of lunch food, but, if the food is not liked by the individual or his or her friends, other alternatives are chosen.
- Parents have a great influence on the food eaten at the family dinner but they are assumed to consider their children’s taste preferences.
- Food served at school lunches is assumed to be healthy. Adolescents also generally consider their parents to make healthy food choices.
- The main factors that influence adolescents’ snack choices are taste, availability (at home), convenience and ease of preparation.
• Food and meal habits during weekends differ from habits on school days. Breakfast tends to be “brunch”, and (family) dinners are more elaborate.
• As adolescents become older they make more independent choices and skipping meals becomes more common. Health considerations also become more common.
• Both “junk food” and “good food” can be favourites. It is common to restrict eating favourites in order not to get bored.
• There is a general awareness of nutritional supplements but they are also viewed with scepticism.
• Vitamins are seen as something positive and many adolescents take vitamin tablets on the influence of their parents. Minerals and Omega 3 are also seen as positive.
• There is a strong awareness that a proper and balanced diet satisfies needs.
• Fruit, vegetables and various sport symbols were given as the most important factors that influence good health.
• The main components of a healthy lifestyle are considered to be eating healthy foods, regular physical exercise, having fun, relaxing and sleeping well. Many also mentioned that drinking water is a factor that contributes to good health.
• Apart from taking part in physical activities at school many adolescents, although not all, are also active in different sports and physical activities outside of school.
• Sitting many hours in front of the computer or the TV is seen as the most characteristic feature of an unhealthy lifestyle. Smoking, drinking alcohol and using drugs are also mentioned as parts of an unhealthy lifestyle.
• Many adolescents consider themselves to be well informed about what is meant by healthy foods and a healthy lifestyle. The main information sources are school, parents and the media. Many of those who participate in sports activities outside of school also receive information from their trainers.
Introduction

Food is essential to life. It gives both energy and different nutrients. Eating foods in different types of meals also provides opportunities for social interaction that contribute to a high quality of life. But there are also risks linked to food. Today, when food hygiene is high, many of the risks related to bacterial infections have been eliminated. And, in the Western world, with its surplus of food, the risk of undernutrition is small.

One of the greatest concerns related to peoples’ health in the Western world is so called non-communicable diseases, e.g. coronary heart disease, obesity, hypertension and type-2 diabetes. Food and lifestyle are seen as two factors that have a major impact on the development of non-communicable diseases.

There is great consensus among experts that non-communicable diseases that affect a huge number of people in Western countries have their origins in childhood and adolescence. These are periods in life during which many changes take place, both physiological and psychological. Young individuals are faced with many influences that, together with genetic predispositions, affect their physiological and psychological development.

Poor food habits and physical inactivity are generally seen as the major factors in the development of non-communicable diseases. However, it is generally accepted that there is no single factor that affects a person’s food habits or lifestyle.

The EU-funded project *Helena – Healthy Lifestyle in Europe by Nutrition in Adolescence* (Contract FOOD-CT-2005-007034) was started in May 2005. *Helena* focuses on adolescents in the age group of 13.0 – 16.9 years. The project is multi-disciplinary and many aspects related to adolescents’ food habits, lifestyles and health status will be studied. The research will be carried out in ten EU countries. It will follow uniform study protocols.

Research in *Helena* is being done in 14 work packages that focus on different aspects. Coordination of the work within the individual work packages takes place in work groups. One of the work groups is called *BEFO (Behaviour and Food studies)* and manages two work packages: *Food choices and preferences (WP11)* and *Development of health promoting food products and assessment of their acceptability among adolescents (WP12)*. *BEFO* sees adolescents as consumers and the research has two main purposes. One purpose is to map and compare the food and lifestyle habits and attitudes of adolescents in different European countries and to increase our understanding of what factors have the major influences on their habits and attitudes. The other purpose is to develop new food products that are both healthy and sensorily attractive. This task will be carried out in cooperation between food companies and research institutes participating in *Helena*. It is hoped that this work will also stimulate other food companies to develop more healthy products specifically targeted towards adolescents.

The research tasks in *BEFO* require that information is gathered directly from adolescents. There is no single method that can give all the necessary information and,
because of the different purposes of the two work packages, they require different methods, at least in part.

Qualitative research methods such as one-to-one interviews or focus group discussions will be used in the early stages of the research to be carried out in both work packages. At later stages different quantitative methods, e.g. methods employing quantitative questionnaires or acceptance tests employing quantitative scales, will be applied. It was planned at the onset of the project that the first step would be focus group discussions that give input to the work in both work packages. The purpose of the focus group discussions in WP 11 was twofold: to get comparable qualitative descriptions from several countries and to gather information that can be used to guide the formulation of questions to be included in a quantitative questionnaire. WP 12 aims at developing new products. Modern models of product development emphasise the need of listening to the consumer’s voice in the early stages of product development. This means that information about consumers’ needs and preferences should be gathered and used to guide the decisions taken.

This report summarises the results of focus group discussions carried out among Swedish adolescents. Focus group discussions have also been carried out in Belgium, England Hungary and Spain. A summary report that compares the different countries will be prepared on the basis of the results in all five countries.
Research objectives

The research carried out in this part of the Helena project had two main aims:

A. To provide information on the following topics:

- Eating habits at breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks, during weekdays and weekends
- Food choices, with a special focus on health as a determinant
- Perception of the concept *healthy food*
- Lifestyle and physical activity, especially in relation to health
- Sources of information about healthy food

B. To evaluate nine different food/nutrition concepts, representing the following food groups:

- Cereal products
- Meat products
- A group of “miscellaneous” products

This report summarises the results obtained in part A. The results obtained in part B will initially be used as background information on which the plans for the product development task within the Helena project will be based. That work will be reported at a later stage of the project.
Method

Target population and sample of respondents

The target population of the Helena project is adolescents in the age range of 13.0 – 16.9 years living in urban areas and attending school.

All respondents who participated in the present study live in the city of Gothenburg. Gothenburg is the second largest city in Sweden, with a population of about 500,000. Gothenburg is surrounded by smaller independent cities and municipalities. The population of the larger Gothenburg area is about 900,000.

The sample of adolescents who participated in this study was randomly drawn from adolescents living in the city of Gothenburg. Recruitment was done by telephone. Adolescents older than 16.0 years were contacted personally. If the adolescents were younger than 16.0, one of their parents was contacted. In the latter case a written parent consent was required for the adolescent’s participation.

The participants were given incitements in the form of cinema tickets.

Focus groups

It had been jointly decided within the BEFO group of the Helena project that eight focus group discussions would be held in Sweden/Gothenburg. It had also been decided that four of the discussions would be held with girls and four with boys. It was further decided that the discussions would be carried out in two different age groups: 13.0 – 14.9 and 15.0 – 16.9 years.

The BEFO group had decided on discussion groups with seven participants each. The target number of participants was thus 56. However, to avoid the risk of too few participants due to drop outs, an over-recruitment was done and all those who came to the discussions were invited to participate. Thus, a total number of 61 respondents finally participated in the focused group discussions carried out in Gothenburg.

The design below was used for the focus group discussions. The meaning of the concept of discussion is explained on the following page.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Concept discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13.0 – 14.9</td>
<td>Cereal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15.0 – 16.9</td>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13.0 - 14.9</td>
<td>Meat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>15.0 – 16.9</td>
<td>Cereal</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13.0 – 14.9</td>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15.0 – 16.9</td>
<td>Meat</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13.0 – 14.9</td>
<td>Cereal</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>15.0 – 16.9</td>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The numbers of respondents who participated in the discussions of the different concepts were:

- Cereal products: 25 respondents
- Meat products: 16 respondents
- Miscellaneous products: 20 respondents
Six of the discussions were carried out in the late afternoon or on the evening of school days. Two discussions were carried out on a Saturday. The participants were served sandwiches, juice, fruit and candy during the discussions.

Before the discussions started the participants were informed that the discussions would be video recorded. They were also told that persons sitting behind a wall with a one-way mirror were watching the discussion. The discussions lasted between one and a half and two hours, without any pauses.

The participants were first divided into small groups, two persons in each group who were asked to introduce themselves to one another. After a short while everyone was asked to introduce the other person in his or her group to all the other participants.

**Discussion guide and concept descriptions**

The discussions were guided by an experienced discussion leader. The English version of the discussion guide had been jointly decided within the BEFO group and is shown in Appendix 1. The discussion guide contained the following headings, with expected times for discussing the various topics:

- **Introduction, by the moderator** (Up to 5 minutes)
- **Introduction of the participants** (Up to 7 minutes)
- **Eating habits** (Up to 15 minutes)
  (In the part dealing with snack eating habits the moderator listed all snacks that were mentioned on a flip chart)
- **Food choices** (Up to 20 minutes)
  (A showcard (shown in Appendix 2) was used to stimulate the discussion)
- **Healthy foods and product development** (Up to 15 minutes)
  (Here the discussion was stimulated by healthy items that the participants had been asked to bring with them. Further, the moderator listed healthy foods that were mentioned on a flip chart.
- **Healthy lifestyle and physical activity** (Up to 15 minutes)
- **Sources of information about healthy foods** (Up to 5 minutes)
  (The moderator listed information sources that were mentioned on a flip chart)

The second part of the discussion guide was specific to the types of products that were covered in the concept test. The concepts reflect the interests of the food companies participating in the Helena project. The results of the concept tests will be used in product development in these companies as an active part of the project. Results relating to product development, including results from the concept test, will be published later.

**Interpretation of results**

One or more persons sitting behind the one-way mirror took notes during the discussions. After the discussions ended the video recordings were viewed several times and the information thus gathered was jointly interpreted by the researchers.
Results

Eating habits

Breakfast

Cereals, sandwiches and dairy products dominate
If they have time and are not late for school, most teenagers, both girls and boys, have breakfast on weekdays. Parents supply the framework for breakfasts by being the ones who “fill the fridge”. Typically they eat cereals, sandwiches, porridge and different kinds of dairy products. Common drinks are milk, fruit juice, tea and coffee. It is rare for them to eat vegetables.

♦ I take what there is
♦ Everything is already on the table
♦ Dad has this strange idea that I have to wake up at 07.00 to eat breakfast

Very common that teenagers fix their own breakfast
On working days it is common that teenagers fix their own breakfast and eat alone, or together with those who happen to be awake and have the same school or working hours as they do.

♦ I take a banana on my way to the bus
♦ I make two sandwiches that I eat in my room at the same time that I choose what to wear

Skipping breakfast at times is fairly common
Skipping breakfast seems to be a fairly common practice among teenagers. Time pressure and – to some extent – lack of real hunger are the primary reasons for this.

♦ I almost never have time. Have to get to school darn quickly
♦ I run to school with a sandwich in my hand
♦ I always oversleep and only grab a sandwich on my way to school
♦ If you’re very tired you don’t have time for breakfast

Weekend breakfasts are larger and eaten together with the family
A family breakfast – presuming this is at all a part of the family tradition – takes place on a Saturday/Sunday. This often turns out to be a combined breakfast and lunch.

♦ Bigger and more leisurely breakfast on weekends
♦ It’s more of a family thing on weekends
Then you have the time – that’s what it’s all about
I’m not particularly active on weekends so I don’t need any breakfast
We eat breakfast in front of the TV
You wake up much later so breakfast is more of a lunch
There are only small differences in breakfast habits between the age groups and between boys and girls. However, skipping breakfast seems to be a habit that becomes more common with age. Most of the younger teenagers eat breakfast every day.

Lunch
In Sweden, school lunches are served. Hence, teenagers eat what is served at school and try to like and accept that.

School lunches offer a wide variety of dishes
A variety of food is offered in the school canteen, with typical dishes being spaghetti with meat sauce, kebab and traditional Swedish cooking. Many school canteens offer a possibility to eat cereals, a sandwich or fruit if the teenagers do not like the dish of the day.
I can’t manage on breakfast alone, I have to eat lunch
It’s easiest to eat at school

If teenagers do not like the school lunch, there are a number of options
Simply because school lunches are served does not necessarily mean that teenagers eat the school lunch every day. There are a number of options, one being skipping lunch altogether. A filled baguette from a coffee shop or the nearest grocery store is also a possibility.
If I don’t like the school lunch I take a sandwich
I often take a bun if I don’t like the school lunch
I skip the school lunch and go to the café with my mates
Most of the time the school lunch tastes too bad

Breakfast and lunch often become one and the same meal on weekends. The teenagers eat “brunch”
Lunch does not play a major role on weekends but may rather be a large breakfast. As a substitute for lunch, the meal teenagers eat during the day may be reduced to a somewhat larger snack or a visit to a coffee shop. Eating is often limited to two main meals a day, breakfast/brunch and dinner.
My parents have lunch when I have breakfast
I usually practise sports, so I eat alone
Dinner

Dinner is often a family meal, prepared and eaten when the parents arrive home in the evening, early or late. With a late dinner, a snack in the late afternoon becomes important, and with an early dinner it is normal to eat a snack later on.

On weekdays dinner is typical Swedish cooking with meat and potatoes or pastas and macaroni
Dinner components vary over the week. The everyday dinner offers a wide variety of food, with the menu ranging from typical Swedish cooking, such as casseroles, meat and potatoes, to pastas, macaroni and take away food such as pizza. Lentils and dried beans have also found their way to the Swedish dinner table.

Activities, such as exercise sessions, affect when and with whom teenagers eat dinner
Leisure time activities, such exercise sessions, affect when and with whom teenagers have dinner.
♦ Depending on what time my parents get home dinner is early or late
♦ I'm so hungry when I get home that I often make pancakes for myself
♦ My parents prepare dinner, but I often give a hand
♦ If the school lunch wasn’t good I have to eat dinner
♦ In the evening I usually eat a lot of snacks like cakes and candy

On weekends, dinners are often more lavish, including finer cuts of meat and fish and more elaborate side courses
Weekend dinners are often family gatherings. They are more “luxurious”, include more food and are often prepared from scratch. Finer cuts of meat and fish and expensive side courses may form parts of this meal. Tacos and pastas are also common.
♦ We often have tacos for dinner on weekends
♦ We eat more elaborate and diversified food on weekends
♦ We eat more healthy foods on weekends
♦ Sunday dinner is always with family

Parents bear the main responsibility for buying, composing and preparing dinner
Although parents – especially mothers – bear the main responsibility for preparing dinner, it is common that everyone in the family helps.
• If Mom is tired, Dad and I fix it
• My parents prepare dinner, but I often give a hand
• Mother often gets home very late, so I make my own dinner

Snacks
Teenagers typically eat sandwiches, sweets, fruit, buns/cakes and milk/yoghurt for snacks. If they skip the school lunch or if dinner is very late, an afternoon snack may well be a pan pizza or a hamburger. Appendix 3 shows a list of the most commonly eaten snacks.

The most popular snacks are sandwiches, sweets and fruits
• I usually take what’s available in the cupboard
• I eat a lot of sweets, although I don’t really want to
• You get so tired after school, so you have to eat something
• If I feel like being healthy I take a fruit, if not I take a cake
• Of course you snack, everything from sweets to cakes or biscuits
• You often feel you want something sweet

Sometimes a bigger snack is required. Pizza and hamburgers are then an option
Weekday and weekend snacks are much the same. Beyond that, weekend snacks may also resemble a larger meal, such as pizza, falafel, hot dogs and hamburgers.

Influences on choice of food
The discussion of factors that influence food choice was stimulated by a showcard that gave a list of factors that had already been mentioned and on which it was possible to add further factors. The respondents were asked to indicate the three most important factors for each type of meal. Using this quantitative approach the following factors were found to have the greatest influence across all respondents:

• Breakfast: Taste (1); School (2) and Habit (2); Readily available (3)
• Lunch School (1); Taste (2); My parents (3), Friends (3) and Readily available (3)
• Dinner My parents (1); Taste (2); Health (3)
• Snacks Taste (1); Readily available (2); Easy to prepare (3)
Breakfast

Breakfast is considered to be very important for well-being, for managing the rest of the day and for coping with both school and leisure time activities.

Taste sets the framework, but time pressure from school makes what is readily available important

What the teenager likes – taste – sets the framework for what he or she eats for breakfast. However, breakfast is a meal for which components must be readily available. Once you have found a breakfast routine – a habit – that works, you tend to stay with it. School also plays a role – time is of the essence. When pressed for time – getting to school on time – skipping breakfast becomes an option.

♦ Breakfast is something I have to have so that I can get through the first couple of hours
♦ It’s my parents who brainwash me about having to eat breakfast
♦ It has to be easy to prepare, when you’re in a hurry
♦ I’ve made it into a habit to eat breakfast
♦ If I’m tired and don’t feel well I don’t manage making breakfast

Health considerations are not particularly explicit

Health is not most often explicitly an active parameter that influences breakfast choices. In general, however, all breakfast products are considered to be good for your health (dairy products, wholemeal bread, cereals, fruit juice etc.).

If the first lesson at school is gymnastics/sports, then, to be able to be active, teenagers tend to give more thought to eating in a healthy way – to stay satisfied – in the morning. Moreover, some of the girls think that a proper breakfast helps against gaining weight by making unhealthy snacks less of a temptation.

♦ It’s not like I take a bun for breakfast
♦ Taste is most important at breakfast, because then you feel alert
♦ If I don’t like it I can’t get it down
♦ You can’t manage if you only eat “white” bread
♦ My parents nag about how healthy it is to eat breakfast
♦ Ever since I was very little my parents have influenced what I eat for breakfast
♦ I exercise a lot so I have to eat a big breakfast
**Lunch**

As school lunches are served, it goes without saying that school is the single most influential factor on what is eaten for lunch. If there are options, taste is a decisive factor.

If lunch is eaten at all on weekends, the teenager’s own taste can be the ruling factor.

School is the main factor in deciding what is eaten for lunch
- *I eat what is served in school*
- *I can’t manage without lunch*

Eating where one’s friends eat

*Friends* are also important. If teenagers – and their friends – like what is served for lunch in the school canteen, they eat there. If they – or their friends – do not like it, they find lunch elsewhere, e.g. in a coffee shop, or skip it altogether. Again, skipping a meal seems to become somewhat more common with age, especially among the girls.

- *If my friends don’t eat, I don’t eat*

You have to trust your school to serve a healthy lunch

Little consideration is given to health in weekday lunches. Although there are doubts, teenagers feel that they have to assume that the school serves a – healthy lunch. In addition, there is a feeling that people need to eat something in the middle of the day in order to feel good. They need the energy. Also, when given the choice, tasty and healthy is better than tasty and unhealthy.

- *I trust the school’s judgement – that it’s nutritious*
- *School knows what’s “right” to eat and what we like*

**Dinner**

*Parents* are by far the most influential factor when it comes to what is served for dinner. Most commonly, parents also take the responsibility for shopping for and preparing dinner. Still, the *tastes* of all the family members are taken into account, which means that the food choice is somewhat of a family decision. Dinners are also – at least on weekends – allowed time for preparation. In addition, dinners are very much a family occasion, again more so on weekends than on weekdays. Parents decide what will be served for dinner.

- *Mother knows what will happen if you don’t eat properly*

Health is an important parameter when parents set the menu

*Health* is definitely allowed to play a role in the composition of dinners. Parents are aware that their sons/daughters may not have eaten full and proper meals during the day. Dinners provide an opportunity to compensate for the assumed lack of healthy food earlier in the day. Before going to sports training in the evening it is especially important to have a proper meal that provides the necessary energy.
For Mom, healthy is extremely important
Homemade food is more healthy than already prepared food
You can’t eat food that isn’t healthy

Snacks
Something that tastes good, is readily available and is easy to fix – that is the best snack

The individual’s own taste decides the snack
A snack is the meal where a teenager alone, or together with friends, has the final say about composition. Snacks are more of a working day thing. On Saturdays and Sundays time schedules, and therefore eating schedules, are different.

As long as the teenager likes the taste, health is given some consideration
To some extent, health is allowed to influence the choice of snack, especially among the older girls, but with the restriction that a snack must be something that you like the taste of, also in the long run.

Different routines at different meal occasions
Breakfasts are characterized by habit and “doing your own thing”. Lunches are school lunches, and all that’s implied by that. Dinners are decided, prepared and – at least to a large extent – eaten together with the family. It is a meal where all positive factors – taste, health, variation etc. – can be taken into account.

Weekdays and weekends differ, primarily because time is not a main influential factor on Saturday/Sunday. This allows for more socializing and longer, more relaxed meals. Weekend dinners are the meals most often planned and prepared from scratch.

As for snacks, weekdays differ from weekends. Coming home from school, for example, calls for something different from what teenagers want on a Saturday afternoon with their friends. On the whole, snacks are lighter (sweets, crisps, coffee etc.) and less common on weekends.

Demographic differences
Overall, there are few demographic differences in eating habits and influences on food choice. Neither age nor sex seems to be a discriminating factor here.
Still, differences do exist, although they are not very obvious or significant. For example, the older the teenager is, the more independent he or she is of parents, although they continue to be an influential factor throughout the teen years. Skipping meals – especially breakfast and lunch – seems to be a habit that cuts through both sex and age groups, but is somewhat more pronounced among the older teenagers.
Further, health appears to be a factor that grows in importance with age, both among boys and girls. Weight considerations seem to be more important among girls.
**Favourite foods**

Pizza, tacos, kebab, pasta, chicken and Thai wok/Italian style meals are typical favourite dishes. Classical fine foods, such as salmon, fillet of beef and Christmas/Easter specialties, are also much appreciated. Take-away food on Fridays is sometimes a welcome start of the weekend.

Favourite dishes are eaten fairly seldom, perhaps twice a month – and that is part of what makes them a favourite. Many think that eating it very often would make your favourite dish an everyday, not-so-attractive one – one would get tired of it. Favourites should come at fairly long intervals, so that one longs for it. Further, cost may also be a restriction.

- *If you eat it too often you get tired of it, and it’s no longer your favourite*
- *As long as it is well cooked it’s good*

Moreover, favourite food is often seen as being what is considered unhealthy food, and should be restricted for that reason as well. Considerations about health are clearly taken into account.

**Restricted food**

Junk food – very much equal to take-away fast food (e.g. pizza, Chinese food and kebab) – is liked but clearly eaten with restriction. Tasty but unhealthy seems to be the general perception of foods on which you consciously put restrictions. Hamburgers at McDonald’s are mentioned as an example. For similar reasons restrictions may be placed on eating rich desserts and sweets in general.

- *Unhealthy but tasty*
- *I would eat more pizza if it wasn’t so unhealthy*
- *Meat isn’t good for anyone, if you consider the animals*

It is worth noting that favourite foods often fall into the category of junk food/restricted food. Hence, it is thought to be bad for your health and e.g. make you fat. A high fat content is part of the definition of junk food. In general, you don’t feel very good about yourself if you eat a great deal of restricted food – even if you like the taste of it.

- *I feel a little disgusted; I feel fat when I’ve eaten pizza*
- *I enjoy it intensely while I eat it, but feel disgusted afterwards*

Complicated and time-consuming preparation is another factor that may constitute a restriction on eating certain dishes. The same is true for high prices. Allergies and medical conditions are very seldom brought up as restrictive factors.
Nutritional supplements

**Nutritional supplements are a well known category, but stir scepticism**

Awareness of nutritional supplements is fairly high, but so is scepticism towards the majority of such products. No real enthusiasm is found there. Many doubt that they work, and some fear that supplements may be contra productive, i.e. harmful to your body, at least if overdosed.

- *I am afraid of pills like that*
- *I'm not sure that they work*

**Vitamins are appreciated, endorsed and supplied by parents**

Vitamins are an exception, however. They form an accepted and established category, endorsed and supplied by parents. Vitamin C is an example. Vitamins are taken with breakfast, and can make a person feel good about him or herself in a general kind of way. hey are also believed to keep you alert. Especially in the case that a person is a vegetarian, vitamin supplements are considered essential.

- *Most often, it’s my parents who put it on the table*
- *I have to eat tablets because I’m a vegetarian*

**Omega-3 and minerals have a good reputation**

Minerals and Omega 3 supplements are also quite well known and have a good reputation. Many of the older girls mention iron in positive terms.

- *I eat Omega-3 every day*
- *I don’t feel that it’s interesting right now, but I could consider it*

Because of the heavy media pressure on such product categories, there is a tendency to be fed up with advertising for nutritional supplements in general.

**A proper diet – and there is no need for nutritional supplements**

Further, there is an outspoken and very strong belief that if one follows a varied and wholesome diet there is no need for supplements. If you know that you eat too few vegetables and fruits, however, nutritional supplements may be the rescue. The younger teenagers, especially the boys, tend to think that they are too young to need nutritional supplements. Again, vitamins are an exception – they are supplied by the parents.

Among the older boys, nutritional supplements are often associated with protein drinks. Such drinks are liked, although there is a feeling that they are overrated. While the older boys show an interest in building muscles, they too agree that a proper diet is the best way to do this.

- *Unnecessary if you eat the food you should*
- *If you eat a varied diet then you don’t need them*
Perception of healthy foods

Health symbols
Health symbols range from water, yoghurt, vegetables, fruits and a healthy foods cookbook to sports items such as footballs and training outfits. These are, not surprisingly, closely and naturally connected to the perception of “healthy” – eating in a healthy way and a fair amount of exercise is good for you, directly or indirectly. Natural is closely related to healthy, in terms of food. So is less sugar. Country of origin – Swedish – may also be a part of the perception of foods being healthy.

Health symbols are primarily connected to healthy foods and sports
- Apples are a good snack; they are nutritious and keep you from getting sick
- I think only of exercising, when I think of healthy
- Yoghurt is healthy, there’s protein and stuff in it
- Football is healthy, you have fun and you’re active
- Water, it’s the source of life

Health relates to body – and soul
Personal hygiene, symbolized by e.g. shower cream, is also mentioned as being related to good health. Among the older boys, who are more interested in nutritional supplements, some think that vitamins and Omega-3 can also symbolize “healthy”. There are, however, also symbols that relate to health for both the body and soul, such as music – and even a mini bible. One person brought a passion fruit to symbolize that you need both the fruit and the passion, to be healthy in a broader sense!
- I think happiness is wholesome
- I think it’s psychological, to feel good in your soul

Healthy food
Healthy food means much the same thing for all of these young persons. You clearly know what food is good for you. The list is long and is topped by vegetables, fruit, fibre/coarse/wholemeal bread, pasta/rice, dairy products, fish and meat. Oats in particular were mentioned a number of times as being closely connected to “healthy”. The same is true for water.

A table that shows healthy foods that were mentioned particularly in the different groups is given in Appendix 4.

Healthy foods mean the same thing to everyone
However, awareness goes beyond individual foods and includes such things as protein, unsaturated fat and slow carbohydrates. Low fat and sugar free products are also mentioned.

© SIK
Protein, unsaturated fat and slow carbohydrates are also considered healthy food
The teenagers appreciate healthy food and eat it regularly. Most meals are believed to contain a smaller or larger wholesome element. Eating in a healthy way generally arouses a positive feeling but requires enthusiasm to maintain. In the long run, however, tasty beats healthy.

- Most parts of the balanced diet chart
- Fat and sugar do taste good...

Traditional food

No clear perception of traditional food
There is no immediate and clear perception of what traditional food is. After some thought, the teenagers associate it with “coming from Sweden”, being plain and lacking distinct taste. Still, it is okay and well accepted as part of the everyday menu.

Typical traditional foods in Sweden are meat, meatballs, pork chops, sausages and fish (especially herring) served with potatoes and gravy. The typical Swedish “hotchpotch” and pea soup are also mentioned as examples. Carrot is a typical traditional vegetable. Spaghetti with meat sauce, noodles etc. are also perceived nowadays to be traditional “Swedish” food.

- Traditional food is rich and not very spicy
- Traditional food is boring
- Traditional foods mean no vegetables

Traditional food may also include food with foreign origin
In these teenagers’ thinking, their parents like traditional food and therefore serve it quite often. Hence they eat it. It is a type of everyday food that you neither long for nor object to. It is taken more or less for granted that traditional food is healthy for you, although fairly rich. A generation change seems to be taking place with regard to attitudes towards traditional Swedish cooking. Traditional is no longer necessarily the same as Swedish.

A table showing food described as traditional is given in Appendix 5.

Healthy lifestyle and physical activity
A healthy lifestyle includes regular exercise and eating wholesome foods. However, having fun (partying, cinema, shopping) and studying are also important for total body and soul well-being. To achieve this balanced, “healthy state”, the teenagers say that one should go to gym/sports sessions regularly, spend time outside walking or jogging, drink water, eat nutritious food and try to avoid sweets – plus relax and have fun. Good sleeping habits are also a part of this.

Eating in a healthy way and regular exercising will keep you fit
- Feel good. Do things that you enjoy
- Eat vegetables; exercise; sleep when you are tired
Having fun and good sleeping habits are important for well being

- To do all you thought of doing, but never actually did
- To have friends
- Go out with the dog
- Dance

A majority is active in sports and exercising

Although a majority of the teenagers participate in work-outs, gym training, exercise sessions etc., sometimes several times a week, there is a widespread understanding that there is room for improvement in the area of a healthy lifestyle. More gym sessions at school are in demand. Diets with more vegetables/fruit and less sweets/junk food are desirable. Less eating between meals would also be good. In addition, they believe that less time at the computer and in front of the TV and better sleeping habits would contribute to a healthier lifestyle.

- I feel very bad if I don’t exercise

For some girls, weight issues appear to be a vital part of a healthy lifestyle. This in turn means that they have a bad conscience over eating sweets, seemingly more so than among the boys.

- I guess weight is part of your health

Still, a healthy lifestyle must not go to extremes – a bit of “unhealthiness” is thought to be good for you. Typically, small improvements in all “areas of health” seem to be the preferred way to go.

- Not be like a couch potato

Long hours in front of the computer is part of an unhealthy lifestyle

An unhealthy lifestyle naturally includes the opposite of healthy. Hence it means e.g. junk food (e.g. pizza), skipping meals, little/no exercise, spending long hours in front of the computer/TV and too little sleep. And, of course, smoking, drinking and taking drugs!

- Everything that has to do with drugs

Sources of information regarding healthy foods

There is a clear interest, especially among the older teenagers, in being kept up-to-date about what is healthy food. Still, there is no ambition to become an expert. A fair and updated amount of knowledge, combined with common sense, is considered sufficient.
Especially the older teenagers are well informed on healthy foods

- I don’t think it seems wholesome for you, to think only healthy all the time
- It’s become too much! Health hysteria
- I know more about health than my parents; I teach them
- My trainer tells me what to do

Overall, good knowledge of the subject is in place. The immediate interesting and useful subjects are: healthy diets, proteins, vitamins, slow carbohydrates (especially in connection with exercising), the importance of a proper breakfast etc.

Healthy foods are closely connected to the fear of becoming overweight among girls

There is a much more clear fear of becoming overweight among the girls than among the boys.

- You talk very much about weight with your friends

Parents, school and media keep you up to date

Information about healthy food comes to you from many – perhaps too many – types of sources. It is somewhat overwhelming. Typically information comes from the media (TV, radio, newspapers etc.) both as documentaries and as advertising, from parents and from school (school nurse, domestic science, theme projects etc.). The area of sports, especially sport clubs, is also a common source of information. Last but not least, common sense and your own experience take you a long way, also in terms of what is healthy food.

- From my school nurse – ALL THE TIME!
- You get lectured every day

The Internet is not yet the source the teenagers tend to turn to in order to update their knowledge on health issues. Overall, they do not search for this kind of information – it comes to them anyway.

- You get it thrown in your face every day

Parents and school are the most reliable sources

Teenagers tend to rely most on information from their parents and their schools. As they grow older, however, the media seem to become more important as a source of information, at the expense of parents and school. Moreover, although school is a supplier of knowledge, there is considerable doubt that school always serves healthy food for lunch.

- I trust school and my parents
- I don’t trust the media; you know better yourself
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Appendix 1. Discussion guide

MODERATOR. As the participants enter the room – collect the ‘items’ that they have brought with them and place them on a side table or out of sight.

Introduction (Up to 5 mins)

- Outline of why we carry out this research; introduce our organisation; groups will be audio recorded; confidentiality and codes of practice.

- Explain that the purpose is to talk about food and food choices that people make.

- Explain that there are no right or wrong answers, that it is their own views that are important and that we want everyone to participate. Ask them please to try not to speak at the same time.

Introduction of respondents (Up to 7 mins)

- First name and whether they have any older/younger brothers or sisters.

- Tell us a little bit about school – what are your favourite and least favourite subjects

Eating habits (Up to 15 mins)
I want to start by asking you about what foods you typically eat on weekdays during school terms.

Thinking first about BREAKFAST (then focus on lunch/dinner):

….What, if any, foods do you eat for breakfast/lunch/dinner?

….Where do you normally eat breakfast/lunch/dinner? (at home, on the street, school canteen, fast food restaurant, supermarket, in the schoolroom)

…. Who prepares your breakfast/lunch/dinner?

…. Do you eat breakfast/lunch/dinner on your own or with family or friends?

…. Who normally decides what you will eat for breakfast/lunch/dinner?

…. Is the weekend different from weekdays? If so, in what way?

REPEAT ABOVE FOR LUNCH TIME EATING HABITS

REPEAT ABOVE FOR DINNER TIME EATING HABITS
We’ve talked about breakfast, lunch and dinner but what about eating at other times during weekdays? What kind of snacks do you typically eat?

What are your most favourite snacks (weekday) – THE MODERATOR WILL WRITE DOWN THOSE NOTED ON A FLIPCHART.

What about eating at other times during weekends? What kind of snacks do you typically eat?

What are your most favourite snacks (weekend) – THE MODERATOR WILL WRITE DOWN THOSE NOTED ON A FLIPCHART.

**Food choices (Up to 20 mins)**

What I’d like to do now is give you a list of things that may have an influence on what you eat for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Have a look through the list and I’d like you to choose individually, or write in if it is not on the list, and rank the top three things (first, second, third) in order of importance in terms of deciding what you eat - where 1 is the most important – for each occasion.

Hand out Showcard A (see attached).

**RESPONDENTS COMPLETE SHEET INDIVIDUALLY**

Thinking then about breakfast ……

What was the most important thing that influenced your choice here? How many of the group chose this option? Why is this option important? (Probe fully)

What else did the group choose as the most important thing that influenced your choice? How many of the group chose this option? Why is this option important? (Probe fully)

*Moderators – if many things were discussed for 1st choice then can move on; if all say the same thing for 1st choice, then can ask about 2nd and 3rd choices…*

If ‘Health’ option not mentioned …..

Nobody mentioned health as influencing their choice. Why is that?

REPEAT ABOVE FOR LUNCH TIME FOOD CHOICES

REPEAT FOR DINNER TIME FOOD CHOICES

REPEAT FOR SNACK FOOD CHOICES

COLLECT SHOWCARDS A FROM RESPONDENTS

Do you have favourite food(s)/favourite things to eat? What are these and how often do you eat these food(s)?
What other types of foods do you enjoy eating?

Are there any types of food you enjoy but you positively restrict or limit the amount of them that you eat? Why?

[MODERATOR – probe further e.g. for the foods that you avoid – is it for health reasons, is it because you are conscious of images, or is it because you are on a diet or taking care of your body/weight…]

Does anyone know what nutritional supplements (e.g. vitamins/herbal remedies/probiotics) are? If yes – ask them to describe their understanding.

What do you think about nutritional supplements? Why is that?

[MODERATOR – 1. Do not ask directly whether anyone is taking them as they may find this question too invasive in a group situation – the information may be volunteered by respondents as part of the discussion; 2. Can give examples if they are completely blank].

*Healthy food and Product Development (Up 15 mins)*

**Game:** You were asked to bring along an item that you associate with being “healthy”

Please tell us what this item is and why you think it’s healthy.

What comes to mind when I ask you to think about healthy food? (PROBE FULLY) – THE MODERATOR WILL WRITE DOWN THOSE NOTED ON A FLIPCHART. Why is that?

Do you eat these foods? Why/why not?

What comes to mind when I ask you to think about traditional food? (PROBE FULLY) – THE MODERATOR WILL WRITE DOWN THOSE NOTED ON A FLIPCHART. Why is that?

[Note. If the adolescents are struggling with what ‘traditional’ is – give them an example, such as “for example in Italy, pasta is a traditional food” or “in China, rice is a traditional food”]

Do you eat these foods? Why/why not?
**Healthy lifestyle and physical activity (Up to 15 mins)**

If I ask you to describe a healthy lifestyle, what things come to mind? Why is that? (PROBE FULLY)

What things do you do to look after your health?

What kinds of sport activities are you doing regularly – by that I mean both inside and outside of school hours? How much time do you spend taking part in/playing sports in a typical week?

Do you think you could make your lifestyle healthier? In what way? Why is that?

How would you describe a person who has a non-healthy lifestyle…

**Sources of information about healthy food (Up to 5 mins)**

Are you interested in knowing what foods are healthy?

Do you feel well informed about what foods are healthy for you? Why is that?

What sources of information, if any, do you personally look at for information on what are healthy foods? (Spontaneous mentions – MODERATOR to write down on flipchart.)

[If they need help, can prompt: what about TV, radio, newspaper, magazine, advertising, friends, family, school, school subject, sport club, internet, information brochures from the food industry (leaflets, magazine ads, information on the packaging etc.).]

Which sources are you most likely to use? Why is that?
Appendix 2. Showcard – food choice factors

What are the three most important factors that influence what foods you typically eat at breakfast, lunch, dinner and for snacks?

For each eating occasion, choose (or write in if not listed) three factors and RANK them 1st, 2nd or 3rd.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Breakfast</th>
<th>Lunch</th>
<th>Dinner</th>
<th>Snacks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My parents</td>
<td>My parents</td>
<td>My parents</td>
<td>My parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taste</td>
<td>Taste</td>
<td>Taste</td>
<td>Taste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readily available</td>
<td>Readily available</td>
<td>Readily available</td>
<td>Readily available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy to prepare</td>
<td>Easy to prepare</td>
<td>Easy to prepare</td>
<td>Easy to prepare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price</td>
<td>Price</td>
<td>Price</td>
<td>Price</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habit</td>
<td>Habit</td>
<td>Habit</td>
<td>Habit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country of origin</td>
<td>Country of origin</td>
<td>Country of origin</td>
<td>Country of origin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand</td>
<td>Brand</td>
<td>Brand</td>
<td>Brand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A diet I’m following</td>
<td>A diet I’m following</td>
<td>A diet I’m following</td>
<td>A diet I’m following</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical reason</td>
<td>Medical reason</td>
<td>Medical reason</td>
<td>Medical reason</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (please write in)</td>
<td>Other (please write in)</td>
<td>Other (please write in)</td>
<td>Other (please write in)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 3. Snacks

List of favourite snacks, per group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Grp 1</th>
<th>Grp 2</th>
<th>Grp 3</th>
<th>Grp 4</th>
<th>Grp 5</th>
<th>Grp 6</th>
<th>Grp 7</th>
<th>Grp 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sweets</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruit</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetables</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buns/cakes</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ice cream</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandwich/bread</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffee/tea/cocoa</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisps</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cola</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruit juice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk/yoghurt</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Risifrutti” (rice quick-meal)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cereals</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raisins/nuts</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheese</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hot dogs</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pizza</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macaroni/noodles</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Falafel/kebab</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hamburgers/bacon</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French fries</td>
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<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix 4. Healthy foods

Foods that were considered to be healthy, per group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Grp 1</th>
<th>Grp 2</th>
<th>Grp 3</th>
<th>Grp 4</th>
<th>Grp 5</th>
<th>Grp 6</th>
<th>Grp 7</th>
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Appendix 5. Traditional food

List with traditional foods (similar in all groups).

- Meat
- Meatballs
- Meat sauce with spaghetti
- Pork chops
- Sausages
- “Hotchpotch”, pea soup (Swedish specialties)
- Potatoes/mashed potatoes
- Gravy
- Carrots
- Christmas/Easter specialties e.g. ham

Appendix 6. Information sources

List with information sources (similar in all groups).

- Advertising
- Media: TV, radio, newspapers/magazines etc.
- Internet
- Packaging
- Books
- Parents/grown-ups
- School: Domestic/health science, theme projects, gymnastics/sports, school nurse
- Sports/coaches
- Doctors
- Friends