



Basic Education
Health



Questions and Answers

**National Nutrition Week and National Obesity Week 2020:
“Good Nutrition for Good Immunity”**

1. What is the theme for NNOW 2020?

The theme for the National Nutrition Week and National Obesity Week 2020 is: “**Good Nutrition for Good Immunity**”

2. What are the objectives of NNOW 2020?

- (i) Continue to emphasise the health benefits of choosing healthy whole foods from a variety of mostly plant-based foods such as vegetables and fruit, legumes and minimally processed starchy foods.
- (ii) Encourage consumers to make healthy, affordable food choices during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.
- (iii) Provide consumers with practical tips when planning, buying, preparing and eating food during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Why was this particular theme chosen?

Increasing evidence emphasises the importance of eating healthily during the COVID-19 pandemic, not only for people who are food insecure but also for those who are overweight or obese or those who have non-communicable diseases. In South Africa this is particularly of concern as several studies in different provinces of South Africa have shown that a double burden of malnutrition exists even at a household level with undernutrition among children and overweight/obesity among mothers.

4. What are the major nutritional concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Increased consumption of cheap processed foods and reduced physical activity are among the key drivers of the double burden of malnutrition. The current global pandemic of Coronavirus (COVID-19), and measures taken to reduce its spread, have disrupted food environments across the world. The consumption of processed foods is increasing at the expense of fresh and minimally processed foods resulting in diets that are of low nutritional quality, energy-dense and high in sugars, salt, and fats. Financial hardships, reduced physical activity, and altered purchasing patterns favouring foods with longer shelf life and often poorer nutrition quality can lead to higher levels of food insecurity, undernutrition, and overweight/ obesity. Unhealthy eating is also affected by conditions of stress, distress, and emotional disturbance.

5. To what extent was food insecurity and undernutrition a problem in South Africa prior to COVID-19?

Although South Africa is food secure at a national level, the country is still food insecure at household level as not all households have access to adequate food. Almost 20 per cent of South African households had inadequate or severely inadequate access to food in 2017, according to a report by Statistics South Africa¹. Just under a third (29,6 per cent) of households that comprises more than three children reported that food access was inadequate. This proportion is almost twice the national average. Child hunger is still a challenge in South Africa. More than half a million households with children aged five years or younger experienced hunger in 2017. According to the same report, more than half of households with young children that experienced hunger were in urban areas. The COVID-19 pandemic will most likely result in a deterioration of household food security, especially among the most vulnerable households. Furthermore, undernourished people have weaker immune systems, and may be at greater risk of severe illness due to the virus.

¹ Towards measuring food security in South Africa: An examination of hunger and food inadequacy. 2019. Statistics South Africa. <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/03-00-14/03-00-142017.pdf>

6. What is the extent of food insecurity in South Africa during COVID-19?

A survey by Statistics South Africa showed that approximately 4,3 per cent of respondents indicated that they experienced hunger during the month prior to the start of the national lockdown, which increased to 7,0 per cent by the sixth week of the national lockdown period². The National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS) Coronavirus Rapid Mobile (CRAM) Wave 1 survey shows that 47 per cent of the respondents ran out of money to buy food in April and that between May and June 2020, 21 per cent respondents reported that someone in the household went hungry in the last 7 days and 15 per cent respondents reported that a child went hungry in the last 7 days³.

7. How many people in South Africa were overweight or obese before the COVID-19 pandemic?

The 2016 South African Demographic and Health Survey (SADHS) found that 68 per cent of women and 31 per cent of men in the country are overweight or obese. About 20 per cent of women and three per cent of men are severely obese⁴. Approximately 13.3 per cent of children younger than five years are overweight or obese which is more than double the global average of 6.1 per cent⁴. The 2012 South African Nutrition and Health Examination Survey (SANHANES) showed that 14.2 per cent of children aged six to 14 years are overweight or obese⁵.

8. What is meant by non-communicable diseases?

A non-communicable disease (NCD) is a medical condition or disease that is non-infectious and non-transmissible among people. Currently, NCDs are the leading causes of death and disease burden worldwide. The four main types of NCDs are cardiovascular diseases (like hypertension, heart attacks and stroke), certain cancers, chronic respiratory diseases (such as chronic obstructed pulmonary disease and asthma) and type 2 diabetes.

9. To what extent are NCDs a problem in South Africa?

The 2016 South African Demographic and Health Survey showed that 46 per cent of women and 44 per cent of men have hypertension. Only 9 per cent of women and 6 per cent of men who are taking medication to control their blood pressure have a blood pressure in the normal range. The prevalence of hypertension rises steadily with increasing age, peaking at 84 per cent among women and men age 65 and older. The prevalence of diabetes generally increases with age, reaching a peak of 30 per cent among women age 65 or older and 23 per cent among men age 55-64. The prevalence of diabetes increases with increasing BMI, peaking at 23 per cent among obese women and 24 per cent among obese men. Diabetes is the second leading cause of death among adults and the number one leading cause of death among women in the South Africa⁶. The Global Burden of Disease data suggest that, by 2025, 72.3 per cent of NCD related illness and deaths will occur in low-middle-income countries⁷.

² Statistics South Africa. 2020. Results from Wave 2 survey on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment and income in South Africa. Statistics South Africa. <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-00-80-03/Report-00-80-03May2020.pdf>

³ Wills G, Patel L, van der Berg S & Mpetla B. 2020. Household resource flows and food poverty during South Africa's lockdown: Short-term policy implications for three channels of social protection. NIDS-CRAM Wave 1 2020. <https://cramsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Wills-household-resource-flows-and-food-poverty-during-South-Africa%E2%80%99s-lockdown-2.pdf>

⁴ Demographic and Health Survey 2016: Report, national Department of Health (NDoH), Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC), and ICF, 2019.

⁵ Shisana O, Labadarios D, Rehle T, et al. *The South African National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey SANHANES-1*. Cape Town: HSRC Press; 2013. [http://www.hsrc.ac.za/uploads/pageNews/72/SANHANES-launch%20edition%20\(online%20version\).pdf](http://www.hsrc.ac.za/uploads/pageNews/72/SANHANES-launch%20edition%20(online%20version).pdf)

⁶ Statistics South Africa (Stats SA). Mortality and causes of death in South Africa, 2016: Findings from death notification. 2018. Statistics South Africa. <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P03093/P030932016.pdf>

⁷ Afshin A, Forouzanfar MH, Reitsma MB, et al, and the GBD 2015 Obesity Collaborators. Health effects of overweight and obesity in 195 countries over 25 years. *N Engl J Med* 2017; 377: 13–27. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5477817/>

10. How does obesity and/or non-communicable diseases affect people with COVID-19?

Prevention and control of obesity and diet-related NCDs are important because NCDs are major risk factors for patients with COVID-19. Reports from across the world showed that the majority of patients who have died in hospital from COVID-19 had comorbidities, primarily NCDs such as hypertension, type 2 diabetes, ischaemic heart disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and cancer. Obesity or being overweight is also associated with the severity of COVID-19 and severely obese persons are more likely to be admitted to acute and critical care than patients who are in a normal weight range. Another reason NCDs need to be carefully managed, especially during the COVID-19 era is because of the ongoing research suggestive of long-term effects post-infection. For instance, patients who previously recovered from the SARS virus which shows similarities to the Corona virus, showed abnormalities in lipids, heart and glucose metabolism

11. Why is it important to eat healthy during this time?

People who are poorly nourished are at greater risk of bacterial, viral, and other infections. Eating enough nutrients from a variety of whole foods is required for the health and function of all cells, including immune cells. Dietary patterns that are lower in nutrients, e.g. consisting primarily of ultra-processed foods, can negatively affect the immune system. In addition to eating healthy, a general healthy lifestyle is also important to support your immune system during this time. This means not smoking, moderate exercise regularly, getting enough sleep and trying to minimise stress.

12. What type of foods should people eat to stay healthy?

Most of what is eaten should consist of a variety of whole foods, mostly unprocessed or minimally processed foods from plants, for instance vegetables, fruits, starchy foods and legumes and drinking lots of clean, safe water instead of sugary drinks. Consumption of red and processed meat, ultra-processed food that is high in fat, sugar and salt should be limited and sugary drinks should be avoided.

13. What foods should be given to babies and young children?

- a) Babies should be given only breastmilk for the first six months of life. Breastmilk contains all the energy, vitamins and other nutrients and water in the correct amounts that the baby needs. From the age of six months, appropriate and culturally acceptable complementary foods should be introduced and breastfeeding continued until the child is at least two years old⁸.
- b) Young children who are no longer breastfeeding require full-cream milk instead of fat-free or low-fat milk. Avoid giving young children sweetened and/or flavoured milk or drinking yoghurt. The use of follow up formula/growing-up milk after 1 year of age is not necessary as children can drink full cream milk.
- c) A child's *Road-to-Health Book* /The Caregiver Message Book: *How to Raise a Healthy and Happy Child*, gives some ideas on types of foods, quantities and textures for children from six months to five years.
- d) Experiment with different food combinations, tastes, textures and methods of encouraging smaller children to eat if they refuse many foods.
- e) Get children into the habit of eating raw vegetable sticks or fruit when they are hungry between meals.
- f) When feeding a young child, foods that can cause choking should be avoided, for instance nuts and seeds, whole grapes and large pieces of raw vegetables. Ensure that cooked, soft porridge for small children is of a thicker consistency and is enriched with oil, margarine or peanut butter.

⁸ World Health Organization. 2020. Infant and Young Child Feeding. Fact sheet. 1 April 2020. <https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/infant-and-young-child-feeding>

- g) Ready-to-eat bottled baby foods are costly. Use fresh foods and vegetables that can be pureed or mashed to the right consistency for smaller children. Meat and fish can be grinded to the right texture for smaller children.

14. Are there specific foods or nutrients that can help to boost immunity?

There are no specific food or supplements that will prevent you contracting COVID-19. There are many nutrients that are involved with the normal functioning of the body, including the immune system. For instance, each stage of the body's immune response relies on the presence of many micronutrients (vitamins and minerals). Therefore it is important to eat a variety of whole, mostly unprocessed or minimally processed foods from plants, for instance vegetables, fruits, starchy foods and legumes (dry beans, peas, lentils and soya) that will provide many different nutrients in order to support immune functioning. Long-lasting fruit and vegetables such as citrus fruits and root vegetables are full of vitamins and minerals needed for a good immune system. Furthermore, vegetables and fruit, legumes and minimally processed starchy foods contribute to fibre intake. Fibre is the preferred fuel of the bacteria living in the gut. Keeping these bacteria well fed makes for a healthy gut – the place where more than 70 per cent of our immune cells are situated!

15. What are important points to consider when buying foods?

- a) Compile a menu: Write out a basic meal plan and the groceries that will be needed
- b) Take a shopping list. Avoid browsing, spending too much time in the store, and touching things unnecessarily by making a list of the food you are going to buy
- c) Look out for specials: Look for discounts, coupons, and sales, especially on store brands, which usually cost less.
- d) Compare unit prices (rand per gram/kilogram) listed on price tags to find the cheapest brand.
- e) Buy in bulk if possible as single portion items are often more expensive than buying in bulk. For instance, purchase a whole chicken instead of just chicken breasts.
- f) Dry products and frozen foods keep well for a longer period and therefore can be bought in bulk.
- g) Check that you will use all the food up before the use by date!
- h) Check the expiry dates and quality of food you buy on sale.
- i) Use a freezer if that is available to freeze what is not immediately needed.
- j) Frozen fruits and vegetables can be a cost-effective option or buy fresh vegetables or fruit in bulk if it is available at a good price and freeze.

16. How do I spend the little money I have on healthy food?

- a) Many cheaper vegetables and fruits, such as pumpkin, cabbage, spinach, carrots, apples and oranges have just as many nutrients as more expensive varieties. If fruit becomes too expensive then aim for more vegetables.
- b) Using fresh vegetables to cook large batches of soups, stews or other dishes will make them last longer and provide meal options for a few days. These can also be frozen where possible and then quickly reheated.
- c) 'Vegify' your favourite recipes by swapping some of the animal-based foods (meat, dairy and eggs) with whole plant-based alternatives. Meat can be replaced with vegetables like mushrooms, aubergine/brinjal or eggplant and baby marrow/courgette or with legumes like lentils, beans and chickpeas.
- d) Dry beans, peas, lentils and soya can be used as a 'meat extender and are great in many dishes, such as salads, soups and stews.

Please see the following links for healthy, tasty and also for affordable recipes:

<https://nutritionconfidence.files.wordpress.com/2020/07/nutrient-dense-lockdown-recipes-mandela-day-with-cards.pdf>;
<https://www.nutritionweek.co.za/NNW2016/docs/NNW2016%20Recipe%20collection.pdf>
and <http://www.heartfoundation.co.za/recipes/>

See: <https://www.nutritionweek.co.za/NNW2019/docs/NNOW%202019%20-%20Annexure%20VII.pdf> for an example of a shopping list:

17. What tips do you have when preparing foods?

- a) Avoid big portions by cooking too much food, unless extra food is stored in the fridge for the next day's meal or is frozen.
- b) Prepare food in healthy ways, for instance using cooking methods such as boiling, steaming, grilling and baking instead of frying. Do not overcook vegetables!
- c) Be mindful about the amount of fat/oil, sugar and/or salt that are added in food preparation and use these items sparingly as far as possible. Use herbs and spices to flavour dishes.
- d) Try to include a variety of vegetables and fruit in daily meal plans – not only on weekends.
- e) Include both cooked and raw vegetables and salads in meals.
- f) Portion sizes of vegetables can be more generous if a variety of fruits is not available. Add extra vegetables to recipes such as stews, curries, stir-fries, salads, soups, sandwiches and stews or brown rice or whole-wheat pasta dishes or to egg dishes (scrambled eggs or omelettes).
- g) Frozen, canned, dried and indigenous vegetables and fruit can be included.
- h) Dried and canned beans, peas and lentils are great sources of vegetable protein and fibre and can be used in a variety of meals such as stews, soups and salads;
- i) Since salt, sugar, and preservatives are sometimes added during the canning process, draining and rinsing foods can also lower their salt and sugar contents. To avoid extra sugar, choose fruits that are canned in water or juice instead of syrup.
- j) Instead of letting people dish up for themselves at the table, portion food onto plates. Doing so will help with portion control and going for second helpings.

18. What tips do you have for eating cooked ready-to-eat food items/meals from restaurants, quick-service restaurants, grocery stores or vendors?

- a) Look for items that are lower in kilojoules, saturated fat, total sugar and sodium on their websites (where available) or on provided in-store on menus, information sheets or on display.
- b) Keep portion sizes small, for instance choose the smallest food and drink options or children sized options.
- c) Where possible, select an item from the menu and avoid the "all-you-can-eat" buffet.
- d) Share a main dish. Ask for smaller plates and divide the meal.
- e) Order a side dish or a starter instead of a main dish. These meals are served in smaller amounts and on smaller plates.
- f) Steamed, grilled, or roasted dishes have fewer calories than foods that are fried in oil or cooked in hard fats. Remember that basting sauces or marinades can also be high in kilojoules and salt.
- g) Fried and coated foods, such as crispy chicken sandwiches or burgers and breaded fish or chicken fillets, are high in fat and kilojoules.
- h) Choose healthier side dishes, for instance instead of fries choose a salad with a low-fat dressing or a baked potato, steamed rice, or cooked vegetables or add a fruit and low-fat, unsweetened yoghurt option with the meal
- i) Choose a salad as main dish, for instance with grilled chicken, fish or cheese. If needed, use small amounts of low-fat salad dressing (ask for the dressing on the side). Avoid fried toppings.
- j) Choose whole-wheat or brown bread or rolls, and whole-wheat pasta dishes. Select fresh fruit instead as dessert.

- k) Pack fruit, sliced vegetables, low-fat cheese, trail packs or unsalted nuts to eat during long trips so that it is not necessary to stop for food, only for leg stretches.
- l) Avoid 'specials' where the meal is served with a drink high in sugar or high in sugar and fat (for instance milkshakes)
- m) Rethink your drink – choose water! Instead of choosing a sugary drink, rather choose water which is healthy and does not contain any kilojoules.
- n) Do not just clean the plate, decide to save some for another meal. Take leftovers home in a container and refrigerate right away.

19. How can people practice healthier eating habits during this time?

- a) Make a conscious decision before eating - how you feel: are you rushed, stressed, sad, bored or hungry? Try to drink a glass of water and wait a few minutes to find out if you are really hungry
- b) Reserve time for eating:
 - Try to eat regularly, this means three meals per day, most days of the week. Try not to skip meals as this can lead to feelings of hunger and low blood sugar (like dizziness, shaking or loss of concentration). Breakfast especially is an important meal.
 - Don't eat on the run – try to sit down and enjoy your food.
 - Involve family members with food preparation and make meal time a time of sharing and being together as a family. Try to eat together, at least one meal per day, preferably at the table.
- c) Avoid distractions while eating - turn off the TV, phone, tablet or computer, books or magazines which can make one less aware of what and how much one is eating
- d) Practice portion control to avoid overeating. Serve out portions onto a plate instead of eating straight from the container. Use smaller plates
- e) Take time to enjoy the flavours, smell, colour and textures of food before swallowing. This may also help prevent overeating by giving your gut time to send messages to the brain to say you're full.
- f) Put down your utensil after each bite until you have enjoyed and swallowed what you already have in your mouth.
- g) Do not skip meals when you are hungry. Skipping meals can result in you overeating at the next meal or not eating enough for the day.

20. What tips can be followed for the safe preparation and storage of food?

The following safety tips should always be followed (COVID-19 or not) to protect against foodborne illness:

- a) Clean surfaces and your hands before and after handling food. Remember to wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- b) Do NOT wash produce with soap, bleach, sanitizer, alcohol, disinfectant or any other chemical. Gently rinse fresh fruits and vegetables under cold, running tap water.
- c) Separate raw and ready-to-eat foods.
- d) Cook foods to proper minimum internal temperatures, especially meat, eggs, poultry and seafood
- e) Chill foods in the refrigerator or freezer.
- f) Keep utensils clean

21. Are there organisations assisting with food relief that I can approach?

The South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) provides *Social Relief of Distress* (in the form of a food parcel or a voucher to buy food). Some provinces give this assistance in the form of cash. Social Relief of Distress is given for a short time only – usually for up to three months, which may be extended for another three months. More information can be obtained from the

nearest SASSA office or at <https://www.gov.za/coronavirus/socialgrants>. Many non-governmental, faith-based and community-based organisations also provide food relief.

22. Where can you get more information about National Nutrition and Obesity Weeks?

- www.nutritionweek.co.za
- The national Department of Health: www.health.gov.za
- The Association for Dietetics in South Africa (ADSA): www.adsa.org.za
- Grow Great Campaign: www.growgreat.co.za
- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF): <https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/>
- The Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA): www.cansa.org.za
- The Nutrition Society of South Africa: www.nutritionssociety.co.za
- The Heart and Stroke Foundation SA: www.heartfoundation.co.za