

Eating well for health

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Low wages, tight production deadlines, overtime, and being too tired can prevent workers from buying, cooking, and eating enough nutritious food to be healthy. Some factories have cafeterias that make meals for workers. Other factories provide a space for workers to eat food they bring from home or buy outside the factory. But many factories do neither.

Every workplace must provide:

- a clean, safe place to eat food either made in the factory, brought from home, or purchased outside.
- enough time to purchase, prepare, and eat a healthy meal.
- washing facilities so workers can clean up before and after they eat.
- wages that allow workers and their families to have good nutrition.

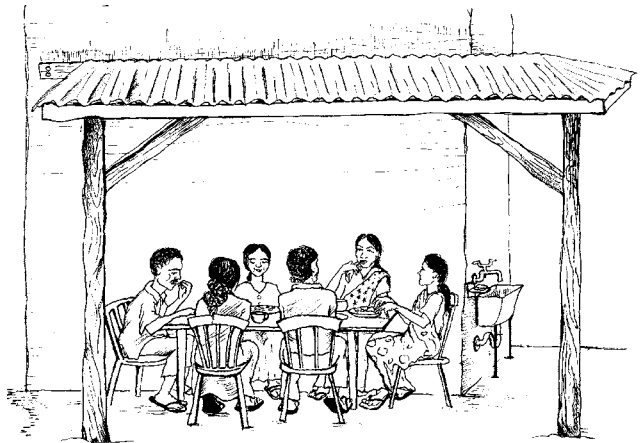
Food in the factory

Many factories provide cafeterias or canteens where workers can go buy and eat food. The food might be inexpensive or free, but workers often complain that it is not very good, clean, or healthy. The factory health and safety committee should pay attention to food safety.

Having healthy and safe food in the factory benefits workers and management. Free or low cost meals nourish workers' bodies and minds, increasing worker contentment and productivity.

A clean place to eat and store food

Whether the company provides food for workers or not, they must reserve a clean place for workers to store food they bring to work and an area where they can sit comfortably while eating. The area should be away from work tables, machines, chemicals, dust, and factory noise. The factory must also have wash facilities with soap and clean water near toilets and eating areas, so workers can always wash their hands before and after eating. Workers may also need a place to remove and store dirty work clothes while eating.



Eating outdoors in the shade gives workers a chance to rest, relax, and breathe fresh air.

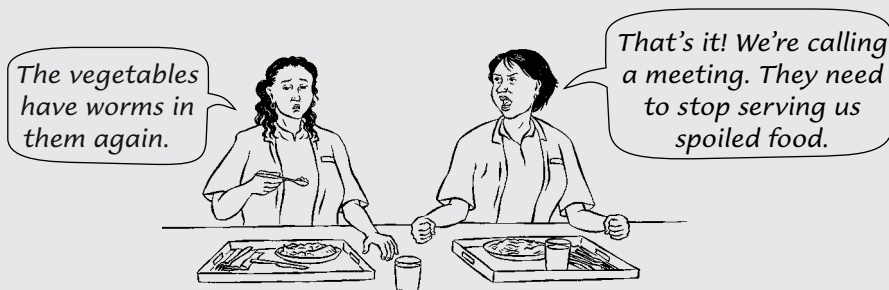
Healthier workers are good for the company, too

The managers of the San Pedro Diseños textile factory in Guatemala City decided to create a meal program in their factory to respond to workers' demands and comply with new labor laws. The program included nutritious and varied subsidized meals, a clean dining area, an hour-long meal break, and cooking facilities for workers who bring their own foods. The factory subsidized breakfast and lunch and offered free snacks and coffee during breaks.

With workers happier and healthier, production has increased, medical costs and absences have been reduced, and staff morale is high.

Workers demand better food and win a new union

A Korean company opened a garment factory in central Mexico, promising workers pay above the minimum wage, meals, transportation, and a union. But the company did not keep its promises. The pay was low, the hours long, and the bosses harassed and threatened workers who were slow to meet production quotas. And all the food in the factory dining hall was often spoiled or improperly cooked, and served on dirty plates. Many workers got sick. Some were hospitalized for food poisoning.



Workers asked the company-sponsored union representative to do something about the food. When he did not, they called a meeting. The union representative also came to that meeting. The workers decided to boycott the dining hall for one day to demand better food.

That day, no workers went to the dining hall. When the boss asked the union representative why nobody was eating, he blamed the workers who had complained. The company fired 5 workers, refusing to give any reason. The union did nothing. More than 600 of the 850 workers in the factory went on strike and occupied the factory, demanding:

- fresh, safe, well-cooked food in the factory dining hall.
- a new union chosen by the workers.
- reinstatement of the fired workers.

The striking workers were violently evicted by the police, but they continued to fight for a worker-led union for 9 months. They got support from unions in the United States to pressure the Korean company, the Mexican government, and the brand-name buyers of the clothes — including Nike and Reebok — to accept a new union as required by Mexican law and ILO conventions. The workers finally won, and their union became the first independent union in a garment factory in the state of Puebla, Mexico. With this union, they also won better conditions, including safe, clean food.

Food vendors outside the factory

Food vendors offer cheap and fast food, and are a very popular meal source for factory workers. Some factories that do not have a meal plan contract vendors to come and offer food inside the factory. Most vendors sell food outside the factory during meal breaks.

Street food is tasty and often fresh, but when vendors do not wash their hands with soap and clean water when preparing, serving, or selling the food, or they do not keep the food at the right temperature and covered, then the food can become contaminated and make you sick. Dishes and utensils that are not washed properly can also spread diseases. When there are no tables or benches, workers have to sit on the ground or curb around the factory entrance.

Vendors are part of the community and supporting their businesses is also a good thing for the community as a whole. If you feel that the vendors are not offering you clean, healthy food, you might organize a meeting with workers and vendors, as well as the factory managers, to find solutions to the problem. For example, the factory owners could allow vendors to use the factory facilities to wash their hands and dishes. You can also suggest that vendors offer healthier food choices.

Eat a variety of food

When your body is weak from lack of food, you feel tired all the time and you can get sick more often. When you are hungry and tired, you are also more likely to be injured.

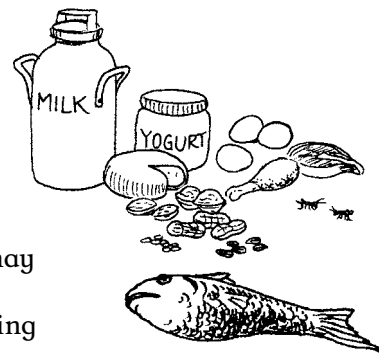
Eat local, fresh foods that have a lot of nutrients. Eating enough food is especially important for pregnant women, women who are breastfeeding, and anyone with a health problem.



Carbohydrates are the main food that most people eat with each meal, such as rice, maize, wheat, millet, cassava, taro, plantain, breadfruit, bread, or pasta. They give the body energy but need to be combined with other foods to be nutritious. Whole grains and brown rice are more nutritious than processed grains and white rice, and will make you feel fuller for longer.



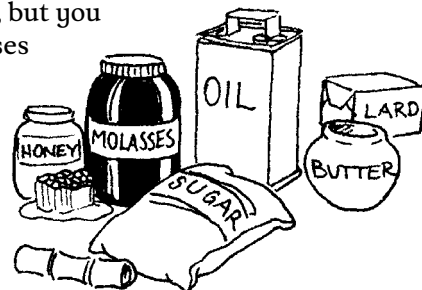
Proteins are needed for strong muscles, bones, and blood. Protein foods include legumes (beans, peas, and lentils), nuts, seeds, meat, fish, and dairy products. Blood and organ meats like liver, heart, and kidney are nutritious and cost less than other meats, as are eggs, fish, and chicken. Fish is a healthy protein, but if it comes from polluted water, it may contain mercury and other poisons. To be safe, children and pregnant women should avoid eating fatty fish more than once a week.



Vegetables and fruits contain vitamins and minerals to help the body fight infection and keep the eyes, skin, and bones healthy. Fruits and vegetables of different colors have different nutrients, so try to eat different kinds and colors. You can get some nutrients from canned or processed fruit, but processed fruit juices have a lot of sugar and are as bad for you as a soda or cola drink.



Sugars and fats also give the body energy, but you only need a little. Too much sugar or fat causes serious health problems, such as obesity, diabetes, and heart problems. Choose natural sugar and fats: fresh fruit, honey, whole sugar cane, and molasses are all healthy foods that contain sugar. Nuts, seeds, avocados, vegetable oil, butter, ghee, lard, and fatty meat are foods that contain fats.



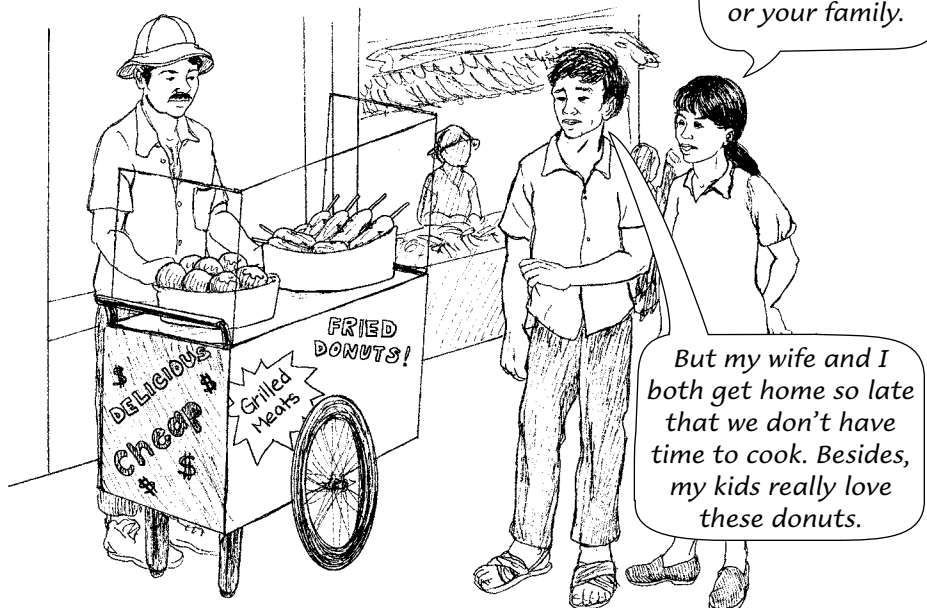
Avoid unhealthy foods

Too many foods are available that are unhealthy. Many of them are sold under the pretense that they are actually better for us than natural, local food but that is rarely the case. Local, natural food, the food that our grandparents ate, is better for us than any processed, or junk, food. To be healthy and strong, we not only have to eat healthy, nutritious food, but we must also avoid the unhealthy ones. Unhealthy foods may seem cheaper, but often they cost a lot if you buy enough to fill you up.

Around factories you often find fast-food restaurants selling hamburgers or other processed meats, or stores selling soda pop, packaged candy, or salty snacks. These foods do not contain the vitamins and minerals you can get from eating beans, vegetables, fruits, grains, and unprocessed meats. Processed foods usually contain a lot of chemicals, salt, and sugar to make them taste good and to addict you to them. They cause health problems such as diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, obesity, headaches, and digestive problems. Sugary foods also damage the teeth.



Fruits and vegetables cost about the same as junk food, but junk food harms your health.



You know that this food is not very good for you or your family.

But my wife and I both get home so late that we don't have time to cook. Besides, my kids really love these donuts.

Eat well with little money or time

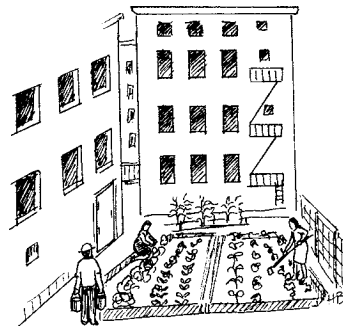
Workers who have little time can look for foods that do not take much preparation, but that taste good and have a lot of nutrition.

- **Buy inexpensive, local foods**, such as beans and grains. Sometimes we think that as we earn more money we should stop eating what some see as poor people's foods. But often, these are the most nutritious.
- **Don't throw away the greens of vegetables** that grow under the ground, such as beets or radishes. Add them to dishes you are cooking — they are full of vitamins and minerals.
- **Keep the water** that you used to boil beans, meat, or vegetables. You can drink it or use it to cook grains because some vitamins stay in the water.
- **Fruits, nuts, seeds, cheese, and cooked or raw vegetables** are all fairly quick to prepare and eat.
- **Spend your money on fresh, whole foods** that you can cook, instead of spending your money on packaged or canned food.



Bringing home-cooked food to work is the cheapest and safest way of eating healthy foods. Save some of your meal from the previous day to bring for breakfast, lunch, or dinner the next day. This way you will not have to buy food from the cafeteria or the vendors.

- **You can grow some foods**, even if you live in the city and have no land. You can grow food in containers, for example. Many vegetables will grow in a small patch of dirt that gets sun and regular watering. A community garden can provide fresh, healthy food at a very low price. Neighbors can raise chickens together and share the eggs and meat. (For more ideas on improving urban diets, see chapters 12 and 15 of *A Community Guide to Environmental Health*.)



Share the work of buying and cooking food

Co-workers or several families can often save money by buying food in larger amounts to share. Buying more food in one trip can save money on transportation. When people take turns doing the shopping, each person saves time and money.

When all the adults in a household work for pay, it is not fair for some — usually the women — to do all the cooking and cleaning. When the work of planning and preparing meals is equally shared, it is easier for everyone to eat healthier, get more rest, and feel less stress. Even if you eat together only one night a week, it can be a good break. It is also an excellent way to talk about common concerns in a relaxed situation. Plan ahead and decide:

- how much each person or family will spend on food.
- how and when to collect the money to buy food.
- how to prepare the menus ahead of time.
- how to assign each person or family's task for each meal.
- how to take turns shopping, preparing the food, cooking, and cleaning up.
- how to help everyone learn to cook tasty, nutritious meals.

