



REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA

FOOD & NUTRITION GUIDELINES FOR NAMIBIA

FOOD CHOICES FOR A HEALTHY LIFE

Prepared under the auspices of the
National Food Security and Nutrition Council
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Foreword

In Namibia, a large portion of the population suffers from various forms of malnutrition as a consequence of an inadequate food intake. This not only causes individual suffering and hardship, but also places an enormous strain on the country's economy that could be avoided.

The Government of Namibia, in its commitment to alleviate the problems of food insecurity and malnutrition, therefore declared the period 1992-2002 as the Food and Nutrition Decade and in 1995 developed a 'Food Security and Nutrition Policy for Namibia' and a 'Food Security and Nutrition Action Plan'. The objective of the Policy and Action Plan is the improvement of the nutritional status of the population. The National Food Security and Nutrition Council and its Technical Committee are coordinating the implementation of the policy through the programmes outlined in the Action Plan. One of the projects is the development of nutritional guidelines for Namibia.

Alerted by the fact that there were no guidelines based on the Namibian situation, and that ministries and organisations involved in nutrition education were using guidelines developed in various different countries, the Namibian Home Economics Advisory Board initiated the development of Namibian Food and Nutrition Guidelines.

A working group composed of experts from several ministries and institutions involved in food, nutrition and health was formed and endowed with the task of analysing the data available for Namibia and to develop guidelines to form a solid basis for nutrition education work in our country.

It is our honour and pleasure to herewith present the result of the work of the working group, the 'Food and Nutrition Guidelines for Namibia'. We sincerely hope that these will be widely distributed and extensively utilised. It is particularly in conjunction with a range of different educational programmes and materials that will now be developed on the basis of the 'Food and Nutrition Guidelines', that the messages contained can reach all communities and contribute to the improvement of the nutritional situation in Namibia.

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Introduction

The essential role of nutrition in the promotion and enhancement of the overall quality and span of life is widely and well recognised. However, many Namibians suffer from nutritional disorders that are due to an inadequate food intake, both in terms of quality and quantity. These nutrition problems are related to diets¹, which are monotonous, deficient in food energy and contain few foods that are rich in vitamins and minerals.

On the other hand, there is a considerably large group of Namibians which, because of an excessive and imbalanced food intake, suffers from obesity and related chronic diseases, such as diabetes, hypertension and coronary heart disease.

However, nutritional deficiencies in an individual are not always due to poverty and a lack of foods necessary to maintain health. Many cultural practices, eating habits, sanitation and hygienic practices result in the neglect of the most vulnerable members of a family, for instance infants, children, pregnant and lactating women and the elderly, or they affect the quality of food which is consumed. In these situations there is an urgent need to create an awareness of nutritional needs, the different functions of the various categories of foods, the proper combination of foods and their appropriate preparation and use. This awareness can be created by nutrition education and communication.

The guidelines provided in this booklet can play an important role in this effort. They should be used by professionals in nutrition education countrywide to design educational materials and programmes that contain correct, appropriate and consistent information. In this way, the impact of nutrition education and communication can be more widely felt.

What are 'Food and Nutrition Guidelines'?

The 'Food and Nutrition Guidelines' contained here are statements of advice to the general population about healthy food choices. If this advice regarding diet in general is followed, then diet will contribute to a healthy lifestyle, which in turn helps to reduce the risk of developing any of the various diet-related diseases.

The guidelines aim to help people to develop and practise healthy eating habits. They are based upon current scientific knowledge and the best public health advice available at present. They contain up-to-date data on the relationship between diet and disease, nutrients available in the Namibian food supply, dietary habits, and the profile of morbidity and mortality in Namibia.

The 'Food and Nutrition Guidelines' apply to the total diet, and it is not appropriate to use them to assess the 'healthiness' of individual food items. Similarly, the 'Food and Nutrition Guidelines' are designed for consideration as a coherent set of advice or information, and the individual guidelines cannot be considered in isolation.

Objective of the 'Food and Nutrition Guidelines'

The objective of the 'Food and Nutrition Guidelines' is to promote a healthy lifestyle and a healthful diet. A healthful diet contains the amounts of essential nutrients and food energy needed to prevent nutritional deficiencies and excesses. The 'Food and Nutrition Guidelines' therefore promote the consumption of culturally acceptable healthy foods of a wide variety. Healthy diets help to correct bad eating habits and reinforce good eating habits which help to maintain good health.

Target groups of the 'Food and Nutrition Guidelines'

The 'Food and Nutrition Guidelines' were developed for use by all Namibians. The recommendations are not appropriate for children below the age of two years, or for groups with special nutritional needs. However, health professionals can largely build on the principles contained in the guidelines when developing specific diets for groups with special needs. For example, some modification of these guidelines will be needed for groups such as infants and young children, pregnant and lactating women, people with special nutrient or food requirements, and those with acute or chronic illnesses.

The terms 'diet' and 'dietary' as used throughout this booklet, refer to any individual's usual pattern of food intake from day to day. 'Diet' and 'dietary' do not imply a specific diet recommended for medical purposes or aesthetic reasons (for example, a slimming diet).

How to use the 'Food and Nutrition Guidelines'

Nutrition as a science is complex and to communicate the information available on the subject, more background material and explanation is required than can be given in brief statements. The 'Food and Nutrition Guidelines' as contained in this booklet are guidelines for healthy eating, but in order to use them as a practical tool for the individual and to achieve their ultimate goal, supporting educational programmes are also needed. Professionals in the health, education, agriculture and other related sectors are therefore invited to develop more complete education programmes and materials tailored to the needs of the population groups they serve, based on the contents of this booklet. In developing any new materials, the particular nutritional needs of specific population groups, as well as cultural differences in food choice, should always be borne in mind.

What is a 'Food Guide'?

To make the written statements contained in this booklet more practically useful and in order to make the dietary recommendations visual, the 'Food and Nutrition Guidelines' are complemented by a 'Food Guide'. The 'Food Guide' is meant to assist the reader in selecting foods which make up a healthy diet. The 'Food Guide' can also be used as a practical guide for meal planning. It contains an outline of possible daily food choices, based on Namibian dietary patterns and taking into account the nutrient content of these foods.

The 'Food Guide' promotes the eating of a variety of foods from each of the four food groups. The size of the groups depicted indicates the suggested proportions of these food groups in the total diet and also shows what foods are needed most.

FOOD GUIDE for NAMIBIA



Food & Nutrition Guidelines for Namibia

- Eat a variety of foods
- Eat vegetables and fruit every day
- Eat more fish
- Eat beans or meat regularly
- Use whole-grain products
- Use only iodised salt, but use less salt
- Eat at least three meals a day
- Avoid drinking alcohol
- Consume clean and safe water and food
- Achieve and maintain a healthy body weight



Eat a variety of foods

In Namibia many people suffer from malnutrition because of monotonous and inappropriate diets. Overweight and obesity are often caused by excessive food energy intake and a diet that is not balanced. Eating a varied diet can ensure that all the nutrients and other substances needed for good health are consumed. Foods contain combinations of nutrients and other healthful substances, but no single food can supply all the nutrients in the amounts needed.

Ideally, a diet should be composed of foods from all four food groups shown in the 'Food Guide' (see p. 6) every day and in the proportions indicated by the size of the individual group. The 'Food Guide' shows that foods from the grain products group, along with vegetables and fruits, are the basis of healthy diets.

Many combinations of foods from the four food groups can form the base of a healthy and nutritious eating pattern. By choosing a variety of foods within and across food groups, dietary patterns can be improved, because foods within the same group have different combinations of nutrients and other beneficial substances. Choosing a variety of foods within each group also helps to make meals more interesting from day to day.



Eat vegetables and fruit every day

Micronutrient deficiencies, such as anaemia, nightblindness and pellagra, are common in Namibia. Vegetables and fruits can help to prevent most of these deficiencies because they are rich in vitamins (especially A and C) and minerals. Vegetables and fruits also contain substantial amounts of fibre and are low in fat. Eating vegetables and fruits daily is therefore recommended, because of the beneficial role these foods play in reducing the risk of cancer and other chronic diseases, including coronary heart disease.

In Namibia, it is particularly important to promote the daily consumption of sufficient amounts of vegetables and fruits, including the whole group of veld fruits, as fruits and vegetables are eaten only rarely in some regions of the country.

The amount of vitamins and minerals available in vegetables and fruits depends on the way these foods are prepared. The vitamin and mineral content is substantially reduced when vegetables are cooked for too long and in too much water.



Eat more fish

Fish is useful in many ways as part of a healthy diet. Fish is well known as a good source of a high concentration of good-quality protein. The regular consumption of fish can therefore help to prevent malnutrition. The fat content of fish is variable, but in general, fish contains less fat than meat. High-fat fish, like most vegetable oils and nuts, is a good source of polyunsaturated fatty acids, which seem to give protection against coronary heart disease. Fish is also a good source of vitamins, particularly A and D, and minerals such as iron and iodine. (Only seafish contain iodine.)

Namibia is a country with large fish resources, mainly from the ocean but also from rivers and oshanas. Fish could and should become a more common part of the Namibian diet.



Eat beans or meat regularly

Meat and beans are good sources of protein, iron and B-vitamins. In this booklet, 'meat' refers to the whole group of meats (beef and pork, but also game, poultry and fish), and 'beans' stands for the whole group of legumes (including beans, groundnuts, lentils and peas). Anaemia has been observed in specific population groups such as pregnant and lactating women. These women should make sure that they eat iron-rich foods regularly. There is a high rate of undernutrition among children and it is advisable to include beans or meat in their diets regularly. Beans and meat are not only good sources of protein but also of food energy, which are both important for children.



Use whole-grain products

Grain products such as millet, maize, sorghum and wheat are the most important sources of energy in the Namibian diet. Whole-grains and foods made of whole-grain flour contain protein, fat, fibre, and useful amounts of calcium, iron and B-vitamins. The germ in particular is the part of the grain richest in micronutrients. Refined flours contain considerably less of the above-mentioned nutrients and are therefore not as healthy as whole-grain flours. Pellagra, obesity and diabetes are diseases that occur frequently in Namibia. A higher intake of whole-grain flour will help to reduce the risk of getting these diseases.



Use only iodised salt, but use less salt

Iodine is important for the proper growth and development of the body. A lack of iodine in the diet causes iodine deficiency disorders (IDD) such as goitre and mental retardation. Iodine is found in seafood and in foods grown in iodine-rich soils. In most parts of Namibia foods are low in iodine. It is therefore recommended that iodine be added to the diet. This can easily be done by using iodised salt. In Namibia, all salt sold for human consumption should, by law, be iodised. However, many people use cattle salt and salt collected directly from salt pans that is not iodised.

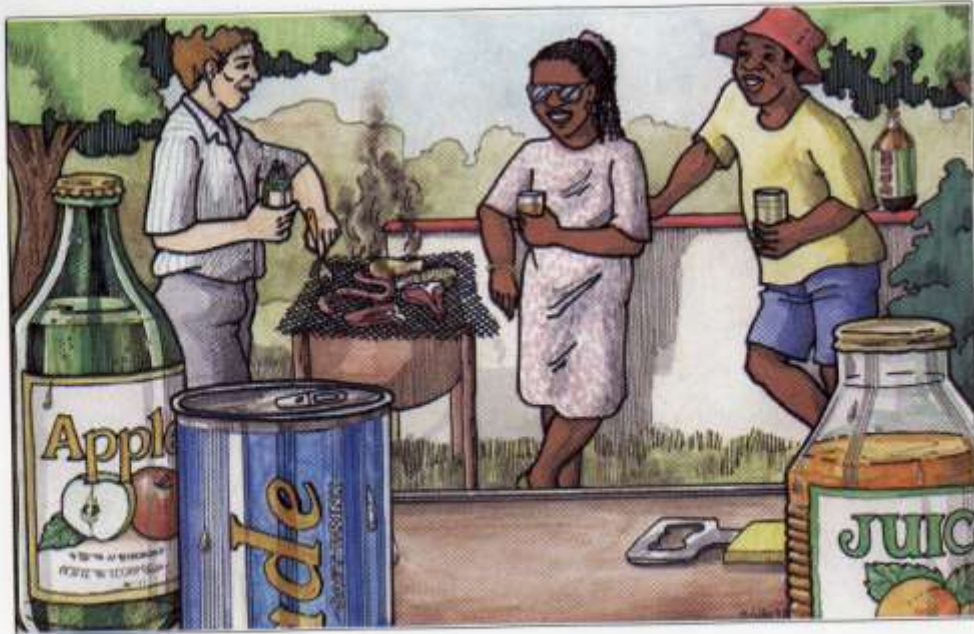
Many Namibians suffer from high blood pressure. By consuming less salt, the risk of getting high blood pressure can be reduced. In Namibia, most of the salt people consume is added during cooking and at the table while eating. It is therefore recommended that smaller amounts of iodised salt is used during food preparation and that very little salt, if any, is added to the food at the table. As an alternative to salt, spices and herbs can be used to make food more tasty.



Eat at least three meals a day

It is a fairly widespread habit among Namibians to eat only once or twice a day, and poverty is not always the reason for this. To ensure that everybody receives all the nutrients and other healthful substances their bodies require, it is advisable to eat three balanced meals every day.

Food intake is spread evenly throughout the day if eaten in three meals. This is especially important for children who cannot eat enough in one or two large meals to meet their nutritional needs. In addition to three balanced meals every day, children should have healthy snacks, such as veld fruits and nuts, between meals. It is particularly important, for both children and adults, to eat breakfast, as this meal will provide the necessary energy base for an active day. If children have three meals a day it is less likely that they will become undernourished.



Avoid drinking alcohol

Alcohol abuse is the cause of many health and social problems and regular alcohol consumption can easily lead to addiction. In Namibia, alcoholic beverages are easily available countrywide, and alcohol abuse is a major problem, causing social and economic problems in families and society. The regular consumption of large amounts of alcohol increases the risk of developing high blood pressure, strokes, heart and liver diseases and certain cancers. Mothers who drink alcohol are at risk of giving birth to babies with various birth defects. Alcohol is also often at the root of accidents, violence, and overall mortality (deaths). Heavy drinkers also risk developing malnutrition and pellagra, because the drinker gets the calories from alcohol instead of from more nutritious foods. If adults choose to drink alcoholic beverages, they should consume them only in moderation.



Consume clean and safe water and food

Water is essential for life. It is needed not only for drinking and preparing drinks, but also for washing and cooking foods, for cleaning utensils and for washing hands. The quality of water and food is important for good nutrition and health. Unsafe and dirty water that comes from dams, open wells and rivers, and is not treated or boiled, is a major health risk. The handling, as well as preparation and storage of food in an unhygienic way can lead to serious health problems in infants, children and adults. Contaminated food and water are the main causes for the high incidence of diarrhoea in Namibia. Dirty water can also lead to other food- and water-borne diseases.



Achieve and maintain a healthy body weight

A healthy body weight is the result of a healthy lifestyle and good nutrition, in the absence of disease. In Namibia, underweight as well as overweight occur as a result of malnutrition. Overweight and underweight people are at risk of developing serious health problems.

Underweight is particularly widespread among children and the health complications of undernutrition are the leading causes of death in this group. Adjusting the quality and quantity of children's diets to their specific needs usually leads to a rapid improvement of their body weight. A normal body weight is vital for the proper physical and mental development of a child. Every child's height and weight should regularly be checked by a health professional, to monitor their healthy growth.

Overweight or obesity among adults is often due to an inappropriate diet and/or a physically inactive lifestyle. Since overweight and obesity are associated with an increased risk for hypertension, heart disease, strokes, diabetes, certain types of cancer, and other illness, every effort should be made to achieve and maintain a healthy body weight. This can generally be accomplished by adjusting the quantity and quality of foods in the diet and increasing physical activity. People who are aware of the principles of healthy eating and who know their own nutritional needs will find it easier to balance the amount of food energy they consume with the amount of energy their bodies use.

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