

Post-Pandemic Eating: What Will Food Culture Look Like After COVID-19?

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I have six and a half kilos of dried lentils and beans in my pantry. This excludes the kilo of peppery *papad*, a half-used packet of gram flour, quarter kilo of soy granules, and a dense kilo of *vadi* (a dehydrated spicy lentil dumpling found in most Sindhi homes) that are awaiting their turn on a non-existent meal plan. This inventory of plant-based ingredients can provide my household's protein requirements for at least 100 days without us having to reach for so much as an egg or defrost leftover Christmas turkey. And I haven't even started hoarding yet. (I don't intend to).

My kitchen, like that of millions of people across the world, reflects the cultural, social, political and economic forces that shape what I eat. It also betrays my anxieties about not having enough food in ordinary times, a fear lovingly handed down generations by my child-refugee grandparents and unwittingly packed into my suitcase when I moved from Bombay to London as a postgraduate student.

But in these extraordinary times I'm not worried about what and how much I will eat. (There is a carbohydrate counterpoint to my introductory paragraph). I am worried that I will have to go so long without cooking a meal for friends or joining an impromptu office picnic that I will be deprived of the conviviality and joy of sharing food with my wider social network.

These are, arguably, insensitive and blithe remarks of a privileged Londoner with three Ottolenghi cookbooks. Thousands of families in the UK experience food poverty in ways that prevent them from participating in society for years. The economic effects of the pandemic could push millions into food insecurity and it already threatens to disrupt global food supply systems and nutrition welfare programmes. Picnics are not a priority. Except the social distancing and self-isolating measures to prevent the spread of the virus mean we are *all* experiencing inverted food poverty: there is, physically, very little social life to participate in right now and possibly for months to come.

As a nutritional epidemiologist, I spend a lot of time thinking about how food and health are related, and try, sometimes in vain, to quantify that relationship. Nutrition is just one pathway linking food and health¹. Lack of access to food can make individuals feel anxious, depressed and alienated (mental health pathway) and they may adopt coping strategies (behavioural pathway) that affect their health in other ways. Food is also entwined with

¹ See Weiser et al 2011 for a conceptual framework describing the bi-directional link between food insecurity and HIV.

the cords that connect culture, gender, labour, education and the environment to the health of individuals and populations. It touches on every aspect of human existence.

What will happen when our food lives are physically concentrated in the home all alone or with a very small number of people for several months?

Already, many of us have turned to technology to help us be together through food. We video chat with friends while we each eat our separate dinners, and turn to Twitter for recipes to cook with whatever we happen to have at home. We are trying to cope. (I am aware that people who have more resources are probably coping better).

As a researcher, I have so many questions about how the relationship between food and health is changing and what will happen when we 'return to normal'. Given the methodological challenges and ethical complexities of studying food, nutrition and health in the time of and post-COVID-19, I wonder if we will ever be able to ask and answer such questions. If we do, here is a list of six I am most interested in:

1. Will the pandemic alter our personal and cultural understanding of 'sharing food' to put virtual sharing on par with physical sharing?
2. Will the prevalence of obesity increase due to reduced physical activity levels and frequent comfort eating to cope with the stress and anxiety of the pandemic?
3. What roles will family meals play in children's and adolescents' learning and development to compensate for the loss of social eating occasions with peers before, in and after school hours?
4. Will the pandemic alter or re-inforce gendered aspects of household cooking and food-related chores?
5. How will people who live alone adapt to the almost-complete loss of physical contact with others at meal times at home and beyond?
6. How will breastfeeding practices be affected by the economic effects of the pandemic, interrupted breastfeeding support at the community level, work-from-home policies for many employees, and families' concerns about possible infant formula shortages?

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