



Healthy Weights  
CONNECTION™

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# Food Literacy

Fact Sheet No. 2

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## Introduction

Food literacy is an important determinant of health because it represents a person's knowledge, attitudes and food skills related to nutrition, which influence the foods they choose to eat. Different levels of food literacy can impact health outcomes in various ways. This factsheet presents information on food literacy for service providers, in order to help them address this important determinant of health.

## Definitions

**Food literacy** is a set of skills and attributes that help people sustain the daily preparation of healthy, tasty, affordable meals for themselves and their families. It has several dimensions (Figure 1).

- Food literacy builds resilience, because it includes food skills, the confidence to improvise and solve problems, and the ability to access and share information.
- Food literacy is made possible through external support with healthy food access and living conditions, broad learning opportunities, and positive socio-cultural environments<sup>1</sup>.

**Food skills** are a dimension of food literacy that is necessary to provide regular, healthy meals for one's household and/or one's self comprise a combination of:

- Techniques (e.g., ability to use cooking implements and appliances, to properly handle food ingredients);
- Knowledge (e.g., nutrition for good health, interpreting food labels, following/understanding instructions, ingredients and recipes, food safety, awareness of food origins and characteristics, and growing foods, if possible); and
- Planning ability (e.g., organizing meals, food budgeting, shopping and storage)<sup>1</sup>.

**Figure 1: Personal Dimensions of Food Literacy**

(adapted from LDCP Food Skills 2013)

Food Preparation Skills, Experience	Organization Skills, Experience	Psycho-Social Factors	Food & Nutrition Knowledge
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Ability to use food prep utensils, appliances</li> <li>•Ability to use recipes and follow instructions</li> <li>•Ability to improvise with ingredients</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Planning, budgeting, buying and storing food</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Resilience, self-efficacy, confidence, control, household food security</li> <li>•Satisfaction, creativity, social connectedness (eating together, transferring skills), feeling healthy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Knowledge about food, nutrition, food safety, interpreting food labels, where to find information, where food comes from</li> </ul>

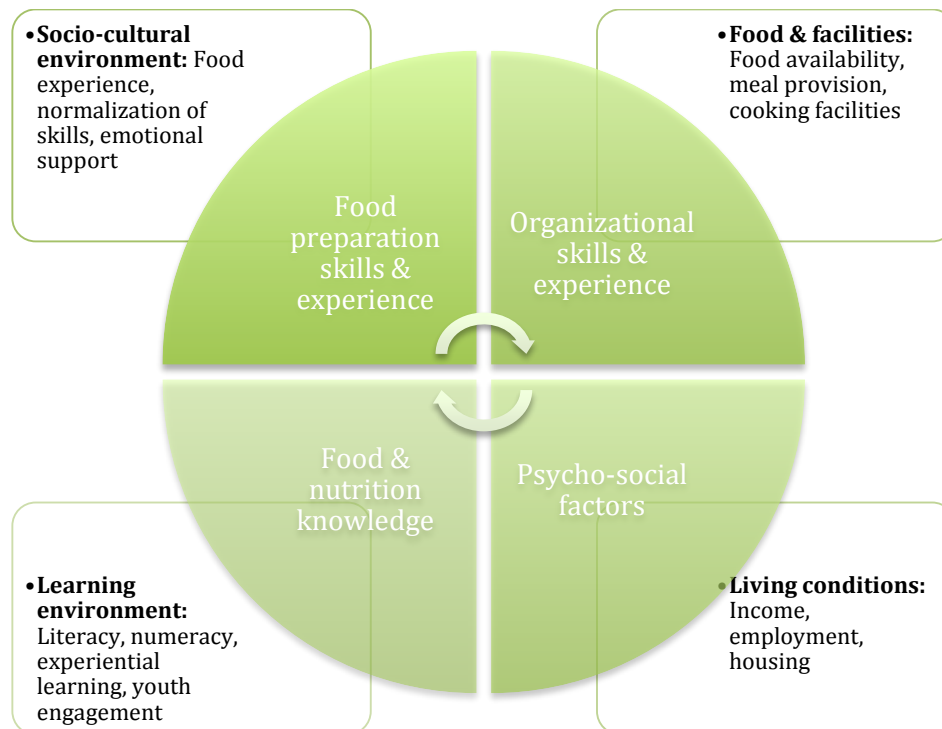
<sup>1</sup> Locally Driven Collaborative Project Food Skills Team. (2013). "Making something out of nothing": Food literacy among youth, young pregnant women and young parent who are at risk for poor health. Retrieved from <http://thepod.cfccanada.ca/document/ldcp-ontario-2013-food-literacy-among-youth-young-pregnant-women-and-young-parents-who-are>



## External Determinants of Food Literacy

Figure 2 represents an ecological framework that emphasizes the societal determinants, socio-cultural and learning environments, living supports, and food and cooking facilities that facilitate and enable food literacy for individuals<sup>1</sup>. A key part of food literacy is awareness of these external resources and feeling able to access them as needed.

**Figure 2: External Determinants of Food Literacy**  
(adapted from LDCP Food Skills 2013)



## Food Literacy and Health Outcomes

### *Food Literacy and Food Safety*

- Proper knowledge and skills are prerequisites to safe food storage, handling, and preparation<sup>2</sup>.
- According to results from the Centre for Food in Canada (CFIC) household survey, only 7% of those who said there was a good cook in the household reported an incidence of food poisoning in the previous year (compared with 16% who did not have a good cook in the household)<sup>3</sup>.
- This suggests that when there is someone in the household with the knowledge and skills to safely prepare and handle food, there are fewer incidences of illness due to improper food handling and/or preparation.

<sup>2</sup> The Conference Board of Canada. (2013). What's to eat? Improving food literacy in Canada. Retrieved from [www.conferenceboard.ca](http://www.conferenceboard.ca)

<sup>3</sup> The Conference Board of Canada. (2011). Centre for Food in Canada (CFIC) household survey data. Retrieved from [www.conferenceboard.ca/cfic](http://www.conferenceboard.ca/cfic)



### *Food Label Reading and Health Outcomes*

- Reading and use of nutritional information and claims allow households to make informed food-related purchase decisions<sup>2</sup>.
- According to the CFIC household survey, in households where food labels are examined during shopping, there is a higher concern for preparing foods that will help reduce the risk of developing chronic disease (e.g., heart disease, cancer, diabetes) and improved overall health<sup>3</sup>.
- Food label readers, as compared to non-food label reader, are much more likely to have deliberately increased their consumption of foods that help lower cholesterol and help with weight loss in the past year<sup>3</sup>.

### *Cooking Skills and Health Outcomes*

- Health Canada's review of the evidence on cooking skills found some evidence that inferior dietary quality is related to the increased consumption of convenience foods and the decline of traditional food skills<sup>4</sup>.
- A number of studies have shown that "low self-efficacy and self-perceived inadequate cooking and food preparation skills" may hinder food choice<sup>4</sup>.
- The CFIC survey results suggest that when someone in the household is a good cook, there is a higher concern for preparing foods that will help to reduce the risk of developing chronic diseases and improve overall health<sup>3</sup>.

### *Dietary Knowledge and Health Outcomes*

- Although many Canadian households have a fair idea of which foods constitute a healthy diet, informational gaps still exist and many of the factors contributing to poor health outcomes could be overcome through higher food literacy levels, particularly those that encourage long-term changes in dietary patterns<sup>2</sup>.
- Improving household understanding of what constitutes a healthy diet and how it can be achieved (both in and out of the home) forms the basis of many public health strategies aimed at reducing chronic disease and obesity<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Chenhall, C. (2010). Improving cooking and food preparation skills: A synthesis of the evidence to inform program and policy development. Ottawa: Public Health Agency of Canada, Health Canada, the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Group on Nutrition, and the Health Living Issues Group. Retrieved from [www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/alt\\_formats/pdf/nutrition/child-enfant/cfps-acc-synthes-eng.pdf](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/alt_formats/pdf/nutrition/child-enfant/cfps-acc-synthes-eng.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> The Conference Board of Canada. (2012). Improving health outcomes: The role of food in addressing chronic diseases. Ottawa: The Conference Board of Canada.