

# Hierarchy of Food Needs

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How would it look to apply the principles of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to food management? Why even wrestle with such a conundrum? The Satter Eating Competence Model (ecSatter) stresses joining with individuals right where they are and working within their constraints and circumstances. Rather than emphasizing food selection and portion sizes, ecSatter operationalizes the Dietary Guidelines<sup>1</sup> by emphasizing structured opportunities to eat, and within that structure, encouraging people to eat preferred food in satisfying amounts.<sup>2</sup> However, when nutrition educators attempt to apply ecSatter,<sup>3</sup> many feel they are violating a deeply felt obligation to promote food-policy adherence.<sup>4,5</sup>

To resolve that dissonance, it has been useful to apply Maslow's concepts to food selection and acquisition. Abraham Maslow arranged basic needs in order of sequential importance to the individual and taught that needs at each level must be satisfied before the individual can become aware of and address the next level of need. From the foundation through the apex on Maslow's pyramid-shaped Hierarchy of Needs, they are: (1) physiological needs: air, water, food, shelter, sleep, sex; (2) safety, security and order; (3) social affection: love and belongingness; (4) esteem, status: self-esteem and esteem by others; and (5) self-actualization: being all the individual can be.<sup>6</sup>

## APPLYING MASLOW TO SATTER

As illustrated in the Figure, Satter's Hierarchy of Food Needs applies Maslow's principles to *food management* drives or motivators and ranks them in order of basic importance for the individual. As with the Maslow model, primary drives or motivators—needs—at each level dictate food-management behavior at that level. Moreover, needs at each level must be satisfied before those at the next higher level can be experienced and addressed. From the foundation up, those levels are as follows.

### Enough Food

Individuals experiencing food insecurity function at this level. They are driven by hunger and anxiety about getting enough to eat. The need to satisfy hunger promotes selecting food items previously experienced as being filling and sustaining—food items that are relatively high in energy density. Although many of those foods provide *nutrients*, nutritional value is not a priority guiding food selection.

### Acceptable Food

A person functioning at this level is free enough from the threat of hunger to be able to consider the subjective issue of *acceptability*. Food security research identifies the importance of “the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.”<sup>7</sup> The definition of acceptable food items is highly subjective and may relate to nutritional quality as well as social norms about food selection and manner of food acquisition. An individual's values may or may not allow accepting public assistance or going to a food pantry. Research with low-income families addresses the notion of food acceptability via identification of personally identified *core* food

items: the preferred and most important food items and beverages that individuals consume from 2-3 times per week to 2-3 times per day. People often refer to core food items as “common,” “regular,” or “ordinary” food items and feel they must be consumed regularly, alone or as ingredients.<sup>8</sup>

### Reliable, Ongoing Access To Food

People who feel reasonably assured that an adequate amount of familiar and acceptable food is currently available can turn to ensuring food availability at the next meal or on the next day. They can plan for subsequent meals, accumulate a food stash, and budget for food purchases.

### Good-tasting Food

Although most people prioritize taste as a reason for food selection,<sup>9</sup> under starvation conditions food preferences become less salient, and individuals tend to accept previously-disliked food.<sup>10</sup> Once food security is adequately addressed, appetite again be-

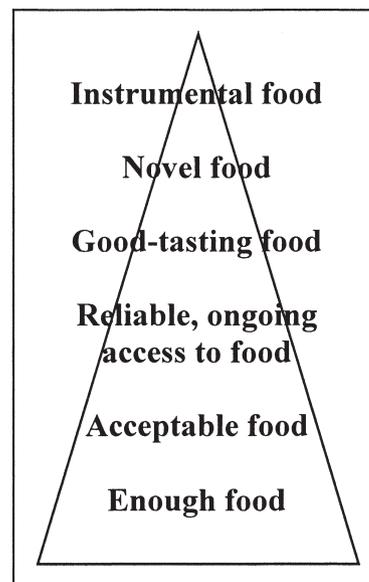


Figure. Satter's Hierarchy of Food Needs.

comes salient, and food choices are influenced by aesthetic and gustatory considerations.

## Novel Food

At this level on the hierarchy, the prospect of wasting unappealing food is less risky, and experimenting with novel food becomes a possibility. Seeking novelty is a natural tendency with respect to human endeavor.<sup>6</sup> However, fearing waste, a person functioning at a lower level on Satter's Hierarchy of Food Needs is unlikely to choose unfamiliar food prepared in unfamiliar ways. Almost half of surveyed low-income parents say they avoid introducing new food items because their child doesn't want them.<sup>11</sup>

## Instrumental Food

The person functioning at the apex of Satter's Hierarchy of Food Needs reliably gets enough to eat of rewarding food and has food acceptance skills that are good enough to allow him or her to eat a variety of food. That person is thus in a position to consider choosing food for instrumental reasons: to achieve a desired physical, cognitive, or spiritual outcome. This description is analogous to Maslow's concept of self actualization.<sup>6</sup> These instrumental reasons may or may not be rational or supported by scientific inquiry. Historically, women ate—or avoided—certain food items during pregnancy to influence the baby's appearance or temperament. A contemporary example would be eating—or avoiding—certain food items to resist disease, prolong life, or enhance mental and emotional functioning.

## SUMMARY

Getting "enough food"—the most basic creature need—is on the foundation of Satter's Hierarchy of Food Needs, followed closely by the need

for what is perceived as acceptable food. When today's need is dependably satisfied, the individual can work toward providing for tomorrow and, having done that, can function at a high enough level to consider aesthetics. Experimenting with novel food builds on trustworthy access to personally rewarding food. Selecting food for instrumental reasons is on the apex of Satter's Hierarchy of Food Needs and can only be approached—and sustained—when all underlying needs are consistently satisfied.

## IMPLEMENTATION

Satter's Hierarchy of Food Needs demonstrates how important it is for the nutrition educator to join with individuals right where they are. For those whose most pressing concern is getting enough to eat, help them choose dependably filling and satisfying food. Address energy inadequacy by endorsing adding fat—butter, oil, or salad dressing—to vegetables and grains and using whole milk. Point out the nutritional value of preferred food items, and suggest additional low-cost food items that are both energy dense and nutritious. But avoid prioritizing food selection based nutritional considerations alone. Doing so is realistic only for people who are functioning at the apex of Satter's Hierarchy of Food Needs.

Guiding nutrition education in accordance with the principles of Satter's Hierarchy of Food Needs does not mean that the educator is discarding or disobeying nutrition policy. The principles of Maslow's Hierarchy state clearly that higher-level needs come into focus after more basic needs are satisfied.<sup>6</sup> Once people address current-level needs, they naturally become aware of and strive for achievement at a higher level. Attending to and helping to satisfy the needs at hand will in the long run help empower individuals to realize greater potential.

## NOTE

Satter's Hierarchy of Food Needs was previously published in brief in *The VISION Times*, Ellyn Satter Associates, winter, 1999 and in *Ellyn Satter's Feeding in Primary Care Pregnancy Through Preschool: Easy-to-read Reproducible Masters*, 2003.

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