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## HOW AMERICA'S EATING HAS CHANGED

When the 20th Century was young, America was mostly made up of rural populations. Rural Americans were very active physically, and their main reason for eating was to provide fuel for the human machinery. Opinions concerning nutrition were rooted in the philosophies brought by European settlers. There was a general belief that a good diet meant good physical and mental health and that protein was important to the maintenance of muscles, but that was the extent of nutrition knowledge. Vitamins had not yet been discovered, and some recommendations emphasized protein at the expense of all other nutrients. Early nutritionists saw little value in fresh fruits, and opposed the consumption of greens as not worth the energy expended in eating them. Food choices were very limited, but the food supply was quite abundant. New immigrants wanted to blend in as soon as possible. In fact dietary assimilation was a mark of pride. So, ethnic cuisine was not popular. Consequently, the American diet in the early part of the century consisted largely of meat and potatoes.

In 1900, only 20.6% of women over the age of 15 were in the paid labor force and only 5.6% of married women worked outside the home. Meals were elaborate if not in selection, in the time devoted to preparing them. Data from 1920 reveals those 44 hours were spent on preparing meals and cleaning up after them each week. In 1912 vitamins began to be discovered, and in the next few years the country went "vitamin crazy." Fruit, vegetables and milk gained much higher status than they had in the early years of the century.

By 1920, food processing had become the largest manufacturing industry in the United States. In 1941, the federal government established the first Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs), and

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the concept of basic food groups was introduced. This period was also the "golden age for food chemicals" with hundreds of additives and preservatives brought to market for the first time. Convenience was most important, and by the 1950s, a large variety of convenience foods made meal preparation easier than ever before. Advancements in technology also led to faster meal preparation.

During the late 50s and 1960s, American's attitudes towards nutrition changed as scientific research and other factors combined to heighten awareness. In 1959 came the discovery that eating polyunsaturated fats might lower serum cholesterol. This was followed in 1961 by further evidence linking cholesterol with arteriosclerosis. By 1962, nearly 25% of American families said they had made dietary changes that included less cholesterol. That same year, Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, provided fodder for the debate concerning the possibility of synthetic chemicals reaching humans through the food chain. There was controversy about food chemicals in general, and the modern consumer movement was launched in 1965 following publication of Ralph Nader's book *Unsafe At Any Speed*.

In 1975, nearly ½ of American women over the age of 16 were in the labor force, and only 10 hours per week were spent on food preparation and cleanup. Much of this decrease in time spent in the kitchen could be attributed to technological advancements. In 1999, nearly 65% of married women were members of the paid labor force. The trend to spend less and less time on meal preparation has continued to the present. However, technology is not so much the reason as lack of time.

By the last decade of the 20th Century, Americans had become much more adventuresome eaters. Variety of choice was nearly unbelievable. Ethnic cuisine, once shunned, enjoyed increasing popularity, and the new foods introduced via that route, added greatly to the variety of food choices. The trend toward eating out had continued to grow, and in 1998, 47% of the food dollar was spent away from home. However, the concern for nutrition was higher than ever, and that fact probably contributed to keeping some meals at home.

Looking back over the last 100 years, it isn't difficult to see how everyone's life has been affected by the numerous technological and social changes concerning nutrition and food preparation that have occurred.

**Source:** Kathy Lyons, Extension Graduate Assistant Electronic Food Rap Volume 10, Number 15, August 4, 2000, Purdue University School of Consumer and Family Sciences, Department of Foods and Nutrition, West Lafayette, Indiana. This article was adapted from Volume 23, Issue 1 (January - April 2000) of "Food Review," the magazine published by USDA's Economic Research Service, is entirely dedicated to the theme of "Eating in the 20th Century." It includes interesting historical information on what Americans eat (now and in the past) and why they eat certain foods. An electronic version of the publication can be accessed at:

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