

Breaking the Cycle: How Socioeconomic Barriers are Holding Guyana Back from Healthier Choices

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Abstract

This article explores the socioeconomic barriers contributing to poor dietary habits in Guyana and how they drive the nation's high rates of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). It argues that the real issues go beyond personal choice, highlighting the cost of healthy eating, the prevalence of food deserts, cultural influences, and potential solutions for a healthier future. The article calls for government intervention, community-driven movements, and educational initiatives to make healthier choices more accessible and desirable for all Guyanese citizens.

Keywords: *Dietary Habits, Food Deserts, Guyana, Nutrition, Public Health, Socioeconomic Barriers.*

Introduction

More than a Matter of Choice

When we think about health, our first thoughts often go to personal choices—what we eat, how much we exercise, and our lifestyle habits. But in Guyana, the battle for better health goes far beyond individual responsibility. It is a fight against deep-rooted socioeconomic barriers that make it almost impossible for many to prioritize healthy eating. We're facing more than just poor dietary habits; we're grappling with systemic issues that push unhealthy options into the hands of the most vulnerable [1, 7].

Guyana's soaring rates of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like diabetes, heart disease, and hypertension demand that we look beyond the plate. What's holding our country back from making the healthy choice the easy choice? The answer is more complicated—and more urgent—than it seems. The challenge lies in a combination of economic, geographic, and cultural factors that form an interconnected web influencing dietary behaviours. This article will delve into these

barriers, present real-life case studies, and discuss potential solutions.

The Real Cost of Healthy Eating: Can We Afford it?

Imagine walking into a market, knowing that the foods that could protect your heart and prolong your life are simply too expensive to buy. For many Guyanese families, this is not just a hypothetical situation; it is a daily reality. Fresh fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins—foods we know are crucial for health—come with a price tag that makes them out of reach for low-income households [2, 3]. Meanwhile, cheaper, calorie-dense processed foods are readily available, making unhealthy eating the most affordable option.

Economic Disparities and Inflation

The economic burden of healthy eating in Guyana is exacerbated by income disparities. Low-income families, already stretched thin by daily living expenses, often have to choose between purchasing cheap, energy-dense processed foods or spending a significant portion of their income on healthier alternatives [4]. Inflation has also played a role in exacerbating this challenge. A rise in food

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prices globally, driven by various factors such as climate change and supply chain disruptions, affects the affordability of nutritious food. According to a report from the Global Nutrition Report [1], food price volatility disproportionately affects low-income households, leading to increased food insecurity.

Case Study: A survey conducted in Georgetown revealed that 65% of residents in low-income neighborhoods could not afford to buy fresh vegetables every week. Instead, they relied on processed, shelf-stable foods that provided calories but lacked essential nutrients. This reliance contributed to higher rates of obesity and related health conditions [3].

Health Consequences of Poor Nutrition

The consequences of these economic barriers are profound. Poor nutrition is not only a leading contributor to NCDs but also a determinant of economic productivity. The high prevalence of diet-related illnesses puts a strain on Guyana's healthcare system and hampers the workforce, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and poor health [5, 7]. In 2022, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that nearly 50% of hospital admissions in Guyana were due to complications related to preventable diet-related conditions [7].

Food Deserts: The Hidden Hunger

Another layer to this complex issue is the presence of "food deserts"—areas where residents have limited access to affordable and nutritious food. In Guyana, both urban and rural areas suffer from this phenomenon. In low-income urban neighborhoods, the only food options often come from small convenience stores and street vendors, where processed snacks, sugary drinks, and frozen meals dominate the shelves. The occasional fresh vegetable, if available, is overpriced and of questionable quality [3, 5].

Case Study: In rural regions such as the hinterland communities, residents often rely on

subsistence farming. While this may provide some seasonal produce, it lacks diversity and essential nutrients year-round. In interviews with residents of Region 9, many expressed that getting to a market was a two-hour journey by car, a trip they could only afford a few times a month. As a result, processed, unhealthy foods dominated their diet [8].

The Role of Transportation and Infrastructure

Transportation barriers exacerbate the food desert problem. In many areas, the cost and availability of transportation can be prohibitive. Poor infrastructure further complicates access to markets and contributes to higher food prices due to increased logistical costs. For instance, roads in certain rural areas are impassable during the rainy season, effectively cutting off entire communities from accessing fresh produce [6].

The Culture Factor: Is Tradition Holding Us Back?

Dietary habits are deeply embedded in culture, and in Guyana, food is an expression of identity. Traditional Guyanese dishes are rich, flavorful, and often high in trans-fats, sugars, and sodium. These meals are not just recipes; they are symbols of heritage and community. Encouraging healthier eating habits means confronting these traditions without disregarding their cultural significance [5, 9].

Transitioning to a healthier diet is not solely a matter of individual willpower but involves shifting long-held beliefs and practices. The challenge is to adapt traditional recipes to be healthier without losing their essence. For instance, replacing certain cooking oils with healthier alternatives, reducing the amount of added sugar in beverages, or incorporating more fresh vegetables into staple dishes can make a significant difference [4, 5].

Case Study: In collaboration with local chefs, a public health project was launched to create healthier versions of popular dishes such as

cook-up rice and pepper pot. By reducing the use of salted meats and incorporating more vegetables, the dishes retained their traditional flavours while improving their nutritional value [9, 10].

The Influence of Marketing and Food Advertising

Marketing plays a significant role in dietary habits. Children and adults alike are constantly bombarded with advertisements promoting sugary drinks and unhealthy snacks. The absence of strict regulations on food advertising has contributed to the normalization of poor dietary choices. A study found that 70% of food ads in Guyana featured processed foods, with only 10% promoting fresh fruits or vegetables [5].

Breaking the Cycle: The Solutions We Need Now

The good news is that we do not have to accept the current reality as unchangeable. Solutions that tackle the root causes of poor dietary habits can help break the cycle of poor nutrition in Guyana. Here is how:

Make Healthy Foods Affordable: If the cost of nutritious food remains high, healthy eating will remain out of reach for many. Government subsidies and agricultural incentives could reduce the cost of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains [2, 6]. Investing in local food production and supporting farmers through subsidies and training can also reduce the reliance on expensive imports.

Bring Healthy Food to the People: Expanding access to markets in underserved areas is crucial. Mobile markets and cooperatives that deliver fresh produce to rural and urban neighborhoods can revolutionize how people access food. Community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs, where consumers purchase shares of local farm produce, could also increase access to fresh food [8].

Fix the Labeling Problem: Current food labelling can be confusing and misleading. Stronger regulations that require clear, comprehensive labels that include information on trans-fats, sugar, and sodium levels can empower consumers to make healthier choices [10].

Educate to Empower: Knowledge is power, and public health education should be at the forefront of dietary changes. Schools, community centers, and media campaigns should promote nutritional education, teaching individuals not only how to choose healthier foods but also why it's essential [9]. Cooking demonstrations, workshops, and public service announcements can further strengthen these efforts.

Support Those Who Need It Most: Expanding food assistance programs with a focus on nutritious foods is another crucial step. Vouchers specifically designated for fresh produce or whole grains can help low-income families access the foods they need [6, 7].

The Role of Policy and Government

Government policies play a pivotal role in addressing these issues. Policymakers need to enact and enforce regulations that prioritize public health. Subsidies for healthy foods, incentives for local farmers, and partnerships with food retailers to reduce prices can all contribute to more equitable access to nutritious food [2, 5].

Furthermore, government initiatives can support public health campaigns that raise awareness about the importance of a balanced diet. Legislation that limits the advertising of unhealthy foods, particularly to children, can also reduce the influence of marketing on dietary choices. Collaborative efforts between government, the private sector, and non-profit organizations are essential to create sustainable change [10].

Community-based Solutions and Grassroots Movements

Change starts at the community level. Grassroots movements that advocate for healthier eating can have a significant impact. Community gardens, for instance, can provide fresh produce while teaching residents about agriculture and nutrition. These initiatives foster a sense of ownership and empowerment and can improve food security [3, 6].

Partnerships with local leaders, NGOs, and health advocates can help bridge the gap between policy and practice. Programs that focus on training community health workers to provide nutritional education and support can amplify these efforts. In addition, local organizations can run cooking classes that teach families how to make affordable, nutritious meals with local ingredients [8, 9].

The Importance of Research and Data

To develop effective solutions, continuous research is vital. Data on dietary habits, food accessibility, and health outcomes can inform strategies and track progress. Collaboration with academic institutions and research bodies can lead to better-targeted interventions. For example, a study on the impact of nutrition-focused school programs found that children who received daily fruit and vegetable servings performed better academically and had improved overall health [3, 7].

A Healthier Future is an Economic Win

Addressing socioeconomic barriers is not just about health, it's about economic resilience. The cost of treating NCDs is immense for individual families and the

national healthcare system [1, 7]. Preventative measures that encourage healthy eating can reduce this burden and redirect resources to other vital areas of development.

A healthier population contributes to a stronger workforce. Employees who are not battling chronic illnesses are more productive and able to participate fully in the economy. Children who have access to nutritious meals perform better academically, which leads to a more skilled workforce in the future [2, 5].

Economic Impact Study: A 2021 study in the Caribbean region showed that countries with lower rates of diet-related diseases had a higher GDP per capita. This finding underscores the importance of preventative healthcare measures, including nutrition programs, as a strategy for economic development [1, 9].

Conclusion

Time for Bold Action

It's time to rethink how we approach the challenge of healthier choices in Guyana. This is about more than individual willpower—it's about creating an environment where healthy eating is accessible, affordable, and culturally embraced. Bold actions, innovative solutions, and collective commitment are necessary to break the cycle of poor nutrition and rising healthcare costs. By addressing the economic, social, and cultural barriers that prevent healthy eating, we can pave the way for a stronger, healthier Guyana. The future of the nation depends on it [5, 10].

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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