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Why is it so Important to Understand Food Neophobia as a Determinant of Food Choice?

Helena Dória Ribeiro de Andrade Previato* and Jorge Herman Behrens*Department of Food and Nutrition, School of Food Engineering, University of Campinas (UNICAMP), Brazil*

***Corresponding author:** Helena Dória Ribeiro de Andrade Previato, Department of Food and Nutrition, School of Food Engineering, University of Campinas (UNICAMP), 80 Monteiro Lobato St., Zip Code: 13.083-862, Campinas/SP, Brazil, **E-mail:** helenapreviato@hotmail.com

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Food behavior is determined by a series of interactions among biological, anthropological, cultural, socioeconomic, psychological, emotional and sensory factors. In this context, diet is not only determined by physiological hunger, but it is also influenced by individual's personal traits like food neophilia and food neophobia. But, one should know what is it food neophilia and food neophobia?

Food neophilia is a trait, characterized by the willingness to consume novel foods and it is associated with the human omnivore condition, since humans are able to eat every source of food. On the other hand, food neophobia is a reluctance to eat or try novel or unfamiliar foods. It is considered a human evolutionary mechanism of avoidance potential toxic food with unpleasant taste, especially bitterness, or exotic flavors. In an evolutionary sense, food neophobia protected people from ingesting potentially dangerous substances in a situation described as "the omnivore's dilemma".

Food decisions have an important emotional component that is most evident in neophobic individuals who presents a complex process of food choice and greater reluctance to consume different types of foods. In this context, food neophobia must also be a state rather than just a personality trait. Its diagnostic as state can be realized by tests such as sensory preferences or the willingness to try unfamiliar foods. Otherwise, food neophobia as a personality trait is assessed by measures such as the Food Neophobia Scale (FNS). The FNS was originally developed in English and then translated into French, German, Swedish, Finnish, Spanish and Portuguese, among other languages.

So, the question is why is it important to clearly understand food neophobia? There is a strong association between novel food rejection with unhealthy eating habits characterized by low fruits and vegetables intake. In addition, the low intake of vitamins, minerals and fibers associated

with the overconsumption of fats and sugar (the so-called western pattern diet) may increase the risk of overweight and obesity. Therefore, the food neophobic behavior can impact not only the variety in the diet, but also and mainly its nutritional quality. In contrast, food neophilia may contribute to a balanced diet with a wider variety of nutritious foods as fruits and vegetables.

But, what we must know about food neophobia? Lot of factors determines it like genetics, age, culture and educational level. It is estimate that about two-thirds of the variation in food neophobia is due genetic factors and, despite being particularly common among children, food neophobia can prevail until adulthood as a result of environmental factors as food access, lifestyle and socio-demographic patterns. Thus, urban subjects with high educational level are less food neophobic in comparison with rural individuals since urban environments promote more exposure to a wide variety of food and consequently greater food acceptance.

Accordingly, foods can be rejected for various reasons such as underexposed or unfamiliarity with certain food and also by taste. It is known that taste is one of the main factors that influence eating pleasure and preferences. So, a food probably will not be eaten if it is not tasty. In relation to taste, bitter food is often the most rejected. However, aversion to bitterness must be overcome by frequent exposure to certain foods and especially by the positive experiences and emotions related to its consumption. Therefore, exposure to different types of food is a way to enhance familiarity and willingness to try novel foods and this must be encouraged from the earliest stages of life.

Concluding, understanding food neophobia as a factor that influences everyday food choices is important to improve healthier eating habits. This will lead to beneficial changes like preventing obesity in childhood, adolescence and, finally, in adulthood.