

# Setting the Table for Safer Food Conversations

*The importance of critical self reflection when working with Indigenous Peoples*

At Island Health, we are striving to provide culturally safe care and work environments for Indigenous clients and coworkers. The information here was designed in collaboration with members of local First Nations to help support culturally safe conversations around food and nutrition.

*'If you have come here to help me, you are wasting our time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then lets work together.'*

*Lila Watson and collaborators. Australia*



## Things to consider:

- Health disparities exist, and are due to the impacts of colonization and Indigenous specific racism.
- Where are you from? What is your ancestry and food culture?
- How has your relationship with food and the land impacted your role as a health care provider?
- Reflect on whose land you live and work on. How have you personally benefitted from colonization?
- What foods come from your local land, forests and oceans? Do you know the nutritional content of these foods?
- Are you coming in with the goal of helping? Respect and create space for the local knowledge that exists in communities.
- Have you connected to the vast food knowledge holders in your local communities?
- Do you know if the people you are working with have been to residential school or Indian hospitals?
- Consider historical impacts that may have caused emotional eating issues (such as showing love through food, avoidance and binge eating, fearing scarcity of food).
- Leave the 'nutrition guidelines' at the door and find out *what* and *where* the person likes to cook and eat.
- Learn about the long standing history of nutrition professionals and government: experiments, food served at residential schools and hospitals and their intergenerational impacts.

# Reflecting on the Past to Understand the Present

- Vast food knowledge and expertise exists within Indigenous communities.
- Food technologies have been practiced for thousands of years.
- An intimate connection was created through years of observing and stewarding plants, land and animals.
- Each community member had a role and skills. These were then passed on to the next generation by oral and practical mentoring.



Smoke house on We Wai Kai Nation Quadra Island at Traditional Foods Conference 2010.

*Colonizers brought in white foods: flour, sugar, salt, lard and alcohol. People were encouraged to eat it. ie 'White bread was considered to be of high class.'*

**Certain foods have the power to bring back memories — good and bad. Consider these historical facts:**

**Food in Residential Schools**—(Ian Mosby and Tracy Galloway)

- Completely different than the food from their home community.
- Food provided was poor quality, and lacked nutrients and flavour - it was often bland, cold, small portions, and under or overcooked.  
**Hunger was never absent.**
- Food was used as punishment (ie. force feeding, withheld).
- Many schools used their students in food and nutrition experiments without their knowledge

## First Nations Food, Nutrition and Environment Study 2009

- 40% worry that food will **run out**
- 91% would like to **eat more** traditional foods
- 36% said food bought **didn't last** and they had **no money** to buy more
- 12% cut the size of meals or **skipped meals**
- 7% were hungry but did not eat because they **couldn't afford enough food**

## Top 5 barriers that prevented people from using more traditional foods

- Lack of equipment or transportation
- Lack of availability
- Lack of time
- Difficult to access
- Government/firearms certification and regulations

*"When the tide is out, the table is set."*



# Our Food is our Medicine



## Food in Community – what you might see:

- It is important to always serve enough food as some people take seconds or extra plates home for themselves or others. It is tradition to always ensure guests leave fed and cared for.
- Food security and hunger is a reality, people may eat larger portions as they have experienced periods of time when food was scarce. Many parents skip meals to ensure their children have food.
- People show love through food, even what you may consider to be unhealthy foods. Many grew up with the 'clean your plate' messaging.
- Some people are disconnected from cultural teachings of foods from the ocean/forests. This comes with great loss and limits intake of traditional foods.



## Creating a Positive Dialogue Around Food:

- Get to know the person before diving into food questions. Don't make assumptions about their knowledge, experiences, or cultural practices.
- **Ask** for permission to talk about food and nutrition and to give advice.
- Explore education in a positive light. Your relationship could be the medicine. **Listen.**
- Ask about their relationship with food. What are their food skills and passions i.e. food harvesting, processing, hunting, fishing? Find their strengths and assets.
- Ask if there are foods/fluids they don't like to consume.
- Are they able to access and eat any local Indigenous foods?
- For some people, certain foods may trigger mental and physical stress.
- Explore foods they enjoy eating. **Don't judge or shame food choices.** Remember the historical context and how it may impact household food insecurity.
- Many people are silent and don't share the trauma experienced around food offered in residential schools.
- **Respect** the knowledge each individual carries and their autonomy to make their own decisions.

*"Our food is our medicine"*



# Foods From These Territories

*The gathering space comes alive when traditional foods are served.  
Gathering around traditional foods is viewed as filling the spirit.*

## Foods from the Water

- Fish: salmon, trout, ling cod, and oolichans, fish roe (salmon, herring)
- Sea foods: octopus, sea urchins, rock stickers, gooseneck barnacles, seaweed, sea asparagus
- Shellfish: clams, mussels, oysters, crab, prawns
- Sea mammals: whale and seal

## Foods from the Land

- Large animals: elk, deer, moose, sheep, caribou, bear
- Small animals: beaver, squirrel, rabbit, birds and eggs, grouse, duck

## Plants from Above the Ground

Berries, flowers, tree bark, inner cambium, sap, leaves, lichen, plums and crab apples, spruce tips, shoots, greens, plants, nuts, seeds, mushrooms

## Plants from Below the Ground

Roots: camus, spring beauty, bitter root, wapato, chocolate lily, other underground parts

***Food for thought:*** *What government policies have impacted the access to these foods?*



*Salmon ready to be BBQ around a fire at a feast at SNIDCEL (Todd Inlet).*

## Tips for Meal Planning:

- Serve a variety of options.
- Invite the Elders to eat first or serve them. Find out what the traditions are in your area—most nations bless the food prior to eating, but ask before serving.
- Offering to bring an Elder coffee, tea, water when they arrive is respectful.
- Connect with community health leaders and cooks to find more information on what to serve and menu planning.
- Set the table with nourishing foods that some families may not get enough of (such as protein, fruits and vegetables).
- Create time for people to connect with one another over food.

## Support for Greater Learning

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*“The ocean is my refrigerator, the forest is my garden.”*

