



# It makes you think...



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*Food, food, glorious food,  
Nothing quite like it for changing the mood.  
So follow me, follow,  
Down to the Mall — oh!  
And there we will swallow  
Some glorious food.*

(with apologies to Michael Flanders and Donald Swan.)

But is it food?

Food is essential to our existence, along with air and water. A very basic concept.

To do more than exist, the food, water and air need to be clean and, in the case of the food, as fresh as possible. Good health demands good air, water and food.

In the case of air and water this is straightforward – clean, without pollutants.

With food it is more complicated. Or is it? Let's start with "without pollutants". It needs to be grown in good, unpolluted soil without the use of chemicals. It needs to be eaten as soon as possible after harvesting. And it needs to be eaten with the least amount of processing, including cooking.

When does food stop being food?

We often distinguish between 'food' and 'junk food'. This is not a useful distinction: it is pejorative; it engenders guilt in those who eat 'junk food'; and it unusefully labels it as 'food'.

Ann-Mary Hromek, nurse, naturopath, ACNEM faculty member and straight thinker, suggested in July 2005 that the distinction be between 'food' and 'confection'. This removes the pejorative and the label 'food' from something which isn't.

Food is essential for us to survive, grow, stave off infections, mend from injuries and recover from sub-optimal health (including diseases). Confection is a reward – personal or granted to us by someone like a parent.

Food nurtures us, gives us the essential building blocks to maintain our health, including a robust immune system. Confection may do so in part, but it can also place a burden on the body.

When does something which we think of as food become a confection?

Some things are easy to identify as confection: lollies, sweet deserts, chocolate, softdrinks, alcoholic drinks, cakes... The list goes on. Other things may be on the borderline: flavoured milk, sweetened fruit drinks, lollies containing fruit, apple pie...

A simple test to distinguish between food and confection might contain questions such as:

- how much processing has gone into this product?
- does digestion and metabolism of this product require more resources than it delivers?
- does this product enhance my overall health and wellbeing?
- does it contain (unnecessary) additives? (this would include such things as sugar or other sweeteners, colours, flavours, preservatives, flavour enhancers, antifungals, etc.)
- what essential nutrients does this product offer?

What about those 'foods' which we buy from 'fast food' outlets? Should these be called foods? Do they contain ingredients which are not good for us? What about breakfast cereals? Apart from the question of the effect on us of eating so much grain, why so much sugar? I suggest that all 'fast foods' and most breakfast cereals should be labeled as confection.

And it is not just the 'foods' we buy. It is also many of the things we prepare at home. As soon as we add ingredients which are not necessary for our health, we should ask ourselves the question: "Am I creating a confection?"

Cooking a piece of meat and eating it without any enhancement, would fall on the side of 'food'. Start adding sweetened tomato sauce to it and it moves in the direction of 'confection'. An apple sauce made by simply blending raw apple or lightly steamed apple (to have with pork for instance), is still food. Using an apple sauce with sugar, preservative, colouring and artificial flavours is using a confection.

I could go on with example after example. It is not an easy distinction to manage, because between what is unequivocally food and that which is clearly confection, there is a blurred area.

Then we must add to the discussion the issue of processed foods (such as bread, breakfast cereal, baby 'food', etc.) which have been fortified with extra nutrients. In some countries wheat flour (and therefore bread) is fortified with folate; breakfast cereals are routinely fortified with various minerals and vitamins; juices from juice bars or in bottles commonly have vitamins, minerals and/or essential fatty acids added, although they may be otherwise unprocessed; milk often has calcium added (which is strange, as milk is marketed as a very good source of calcium).

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Are these still foods? These fortified products also point us to another set of questions, to do with the distinctions between 'food' and 'nutritional supplements'.

I do not want to bring into this discussion any new pejoratives, so I am not going to say categorically that food is good and confection is bad. I am posing questions here in order to have us think more critically about what we put into our mouths and how we promote products through the pervasive media. Why is so much money and effort going into the promotion of products which are clearly on the confection side of the line and so little going into the promotion of those which clearly fall on the food side?

The answer is most probably that our food industry is run by economic imperatives, rather than principles relating to what is best for the consumer. This could be seen as a cynical view, but I suggest it is the truth.

If we were all prepared to put our money into supporting those who are able to supply the simplest, least polluted, least processed foods, then that would change the economic order. Increased demand would dictate increased

supply and would change the thinking of the industry. Chemically unpolluted foods are, generally, more expensive to buy than those with residues and/or additives. As consumers, we can change that.

There is immense and growing pressure on those who manufacture processed foods, to add things in the processing. This pressure may come from particular sectors, such as the sugar industry (sugar turns up in most processed foods), the grain industry (many processed foods contain wheat), the petrochemical industry (artificial sweeteners, colours, flavours and preservatives).

Government supports this trend by allowing this practice to be almost uncontrolled. Too few people are asking the question: "What effect does additive X have on people's health". And when the question is asked, it is too easily answered that there is no 'known' harm, with too little research.

Before a food is turned into a confection (still to be consumed by us), there should be exhaustive research demanded to show that there will be no harm. This should not be countered with the argument of risk/benefit;

there is no need for that argument. Food, naturally produced, is something we evolved to ingest, digest and metabolise. There are some foods which are harmful to some people, but this is a minority. We have not evolved to deal with the chemicals used to produce foods (and which are often still residual in or on the food) nor the chemicals deliberately added to food in processing.

If food processing, including the adding of substances to it, is only for the benefit of the producers or processors, then we need to question that use. If there is also benefit for the consumer, then the benefit to the consumer had better outweigh the benefit to the producers and processors, or we are losing.

As so often happens, issues such as these often raise more questions than there are ready answers for. We must need be afraid of these questions, but we often have good ground for the ready answers we are fed by those who have a vested interest.

