
HOW ROHINGYA PEOPLE THINK AND TALK ABOUT FOOD AND NUTRITION

Understanding Rohingya perceptions of healthy eating can assist with nutrition education and information sharing

People want more information about nutrition and want to receive this verbally or in audio formats

Eighty percent of the more than 900,000 Rohingya refugees living in the Cox's Bazar camps depend on regular humanitarian food rations. Rice, lentils, oil and salt are their main sources of nutrients. Ensuring that camp residents maintain nutritious diets is a challenge for humanitarians, especially as the newer camp communities have now been receiving food distributions for 4 years.

Rohingya people's beliefs surrounding the nutritional value of foods often differ from Western nutritional scientific perspectives. Rather than thinking of foods in terms of what specific nutrients they possess, Rohingya people generally talk about nutrition in terms

of how foods impact particular organs or bodily functions. All respondents in this study are interested in learning more about nutrition. This report provides insights into Rohingya community perspectives which can impact people's choices about what they eat and, as a result, have implications for communication and education about nutrition.

This report outlines key findings from interviews conducted with camp residents about their food habits and perspectives on the nutritional values of common food items.

Who we spoke to

We interviewed 45 members of the Rohingya community, 20 women and 25 men, living in camps 1E, 1W, 2E, 2W, 3, 4 and 5 by phone. The interviews took place between late May and early August, 2021.¹ They focused on interviewees' diets and nutrition information needs. Twenty-eight participants were also asked for their perspectives on the nutritional value and health benefits of particular foods.

Rice is highly nutritious and protects people from disease

Rice is central to the typical Rohingya diet. Not surprisingly, all respondents report eating rice daily and all consider rice to be good for their health. When asked about the nutritional benefits of rice, respondents explain that rice contains a lot of vitamins, makes them strong and gives them energy to work and to perform their 5 daily prayers. Some also believe that rice protects them from getting diseases and from dying. New mothers consider rice important for encouraging the production of breastmilk.

"I think rice makes us more energetic because in the camps we mostly eat rice rather than other foods. I think that by eating rice we can stay well, otherwise many people might die in the camps from different diseases."

¹ Results from the first 17 interviews were published in Issue 52 of the *What Matters?* humanitarian bulletin: <https://app.box.com/s/c5jlhvi5w0dd86knxwkbear4l3t11h>

Fish and vegetables are considered the healthiest foods

The majority of respondents report eating fresh fish or seafood at least weekly, and fresh vegetables, lentils, eggs and dried fish 2-3 times a week. Poultry and beef are generally consumed at least once a month.

Fish and seafood are considered to be the healthiest of the proteins, while poultry and red meats are both also generally viewed as being good for your health. Some see red meats, particularly beef, as well as chicken, as unhealthy, however, causing problems like stomach problems, diabetes and high blood pressure.

Meat and fish are understood to be good for muscle growth, but vegetables and fruits are too

There appears to be a general understanding among participants that meat and fish promote muscle development and growth, as well as giving people energy and making them healthy and strong. When asked what specific foods promote muscle growth, respondents listed a variety of meats, particularly fish and beef, as well as vegetables and fruits such as apples, oranges and grapes. Interestingly, 5 of the 28 respondents mentioned rice as a food which will help muscles to grow, while only 2 mentioned lentils.

"Local chicken is good for your health. Farmed chicken makes people sick. Bird meat removes fish bones from the body and

increases blood flow.”

People know that lentils are healthy but don't know why

Lentils are the main source of protein for people living in the camps. Of the 28 people interviewed about the benefits of different foods, 22 say they believe lentils are good for their health. People speak of lentils containing vitamins, giving people energy and providing protection against illness. People also see lentils as making people “fat”, “strong” or “healthy”, but only 2 think of lentils as a source of protein or muscle growth.

“Lentils have vitamins and if I have lentils my body will be strong and I will be energetic. I will also have less disease.”

Most Rohingya people did not eat lentils before coming to Bangladesh. While 18 respondents say they enjoy eating lentils, 10 do not, mostly blaming lentils for gastrointestinal problems, particularly diarrhea. Some are also simply bored of eating lentils every day.

“I don't feel like eating lentils as my family and I get diarrhoea.”

Dried fish is considered unhealthy but still regularly eaten

Another readily available source of protein for camp residents is dried fish - *fauna mas* in Rohingya. Of the 28 people interviewed, 25 do not enjoy eating dried fish and 26 believe it is bad for their health. Most report that dried fish causes gastrointestinal issues, particularly

abdominal pain, and makes people feel weak. The strong smell of the preserved fish is also offputting for some. However, despite negative views and experiences of eating dried fish, the majority of respondents report eating it each week, with most eating it 2-3 times a week.

“Dried fish isn't nutritious but we have to eat it as we can't afford good food.”

The determination of what the health benefits particular foods offer is often not based on what nutrients they contain. The Rohingya term for ‘protein’- *shokti* – illustrates the community’s understanding of nutrition. *Shokti*, besides meaning protein, also has other meanings in Rohingya, including ‘nutrition’ more broadly and ‘strength’ or ‘power’.

Various foods are considered good for the blood

When Rohingya people talk about the health benefits of different foods, they often think of these benefits in terms of specific impacts on the body. Interviewees most commonly mentioned the impact of different foods on a person’s blood. Specifically, people speak about foods improving blood circulation, cleaning the blood or actually increasing the amount of blood in the body.

“Fish is good for our blood circulation and increases the amount of blood in our body.”

“Vegetables are good for our body and for purifying our blood.”

Fresh fish, green leafy vegetables like spinach, and fruits are seen as being particularly good for circulation. Pomegranates and grapes (both mentioned in the Quran) are commonly identified as healthy foods, and interviewees listed them alongside lemons, apples and oranges as being good for blood circulation. Cow or buffalo brains and livers and the heads of big fish are often perceived to be good for the brain, as are fruits, vegetables and dairy products.

Other foods are also viewed as having specific health benefits in Rohingya culture. For instance, bitter melon (*tita horola*) is supposed to address symptoms of diabetes, while peanuts (*badam*) are good for your bones and make people strong. Understanding these perceptions and how they differ from Western scientific viewpoints is an important consideration when communicating nutrition information in the camps.

People are not receiving enough information about nutrition

Of the 45 people interviewed, 41 said that they have not received any information about nutrition or healthy eating in the previous 12 months. The 4 who did receive information, reported receiving general information from NGOs about what foods to eat. All 45 respondents say they would like to receive further nutrition information. Thirty respondents report facing challenges accessing nutrition information in the previous 12 months, with most saying their main challenge is knowing where to get information.

Respondents want to receive nutrition information in Rohingya, either face to face or through loudspeakers and miking.

Recommendations for health and nutrition sector organizations and agencies:

- 1) Consider providing more nutrition information to the community face to face and in audio form.
- 2) Design communications around nutrition and health using language and concepts which are understood by Rohingya speakers.²
- 3) Provide further information to the community about the health benefits of particular foods, particularly lentils.
- 4) Undertake research to further investigate how Rohingya concepts of nutrition and how the body works differ from Western interpretations, as a basis for more effective communication on health and nutrition.

² Further information on Rohingya concepts of health can be found in the report 'A Healthy Discussion: Rohingya Language Guidance for Healthcare Workers', available here: https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Health-Guide-Rohingya_ENG.pdf
Rohingya health and nutrition terminology can be found in the TWB Bangladesh glossary, available here: <https://glossaries.translatorswb.org/bangladesh/>



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TWB is a nonprofit organization offering language and translation support for humanitarian and development agencies and other nonprofit organizations on a global scale. TWB Bangladesh has supported the Rohingya refugee response since 2017, providing language and translation support to response partners and conducting research and training to meet the language and communication needs of the Rohingya and host communities.

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