

Healthy eating, sustainable living: the future on our plates

Our diet has a major impact on our personal well-being, our individual health, and the health of our planet. Around one third of global greenhouse gas emissions can be attributed to the food system (FAO 2022). What we eat and how our food is produced therefore affects not only our bodies, but also our environment, our fellow human beings, and future generations. That is why the German Nutrition Society (DGE) combines aspects of human and planetary health in its current food-based dietary guidelines (2024a). This way they intend to ensure an adequate supply of energy and nutrients, fiber and the prevention of diet-related diseases for humans while taking into account that our diets have a substantial impact on climate emissions and land use.

Next to the ways of agricultural production, the sustainability of nutrition also depends on food choice and recipes – whether in private households, canteens or catering. Eating healthily and living more sustainably therefore requires professional home economics and domestic skills. They reach from shopping decisions, via practical food preparation skills to professional and target group-specific food service and presentation.

In Germany, many people are aware of the fundamental links between the environment, health, and nutrition. For example, they increasingly want to reduce their meat consumption (BMEL 2024). However, putting good intentions into practice is often difficult. Hindrances are cultural habits and routines, structural conditions under which dietary decisions are made, as well as the food environments. Failing the challenge to incorporate a more sustainable diet into everyday life often leads to feelings of guilt, but also to defiance and reactance (Robert Bosch Stiftung 2025).

Thus, bringing a shift towards healthier and more sustainable nutrition cannot be the sole responsibility of individual consumers. Further approaches and levers are needed. Home economics play a major role in this.

Fair food environments – the role of community kitchen and catering

Countless influences shape the food consumption options we have to choose from: advertising, product information, product range and shopping options, packaging and portion sizes, prices, catering offerings. Fair food environments enable and facilitate healthier and more sustainable consumption.

Institutional community kitchen and catering facilities play a key role in creating more sustainable food environments. Up to 16 million people eat every day in Germany's schools,

daycare centers, universities, businesses, government agencies, hospitals, and care facilities – and the number is rising. Daycare centers and schools receive particular public attention. Here young people can be reached over a long time, regardless of their socioeconomic status. According to the MEGA_kids study, easier access to hot meals in daycare centers and schools is one way to support families at risk of poverty (DGE 2024b, S. 181 ff.). It also provides an opportunity to combine healthy and more sustainable food options with action-oriented nutrition education.

By now, there is a social consensus that publicly funded sustainable catering in day care and school catering is a necessity and should be accessible regardless of income and education (Deutscher Bundestag 2025). However, the enormous challenges involved are often overlooked: needs-based and quality-oriented meal planning, purchasing, storage and preparation, the handling of kitchen technology, hygiene management, compliance with numerous legal requirements, the design of the dining environment and, last but not least, communication and interface management. All this requires a comprehensive level of technical not least home economics expertise which is lacking in many institutions as financial and personal resources are scarce.

In order for community kitchen and catering to make a real contribution to health-promoting and more sustainable food systems, it is important not only to recognize the need for qualified home economics professionals, but also to deploy appropriate personnel.

The Planetary Health Diet as a global sustainability guideline for nutrition

The Planetary Health Diet (PHD) is a global reference diet developed by international scientists (EAT-Lancet 2019). The PHD focuses on both human and planetary health. It shows how premature deaths due to malnutrition or poor nutrition can be prevented and how a global population of 10 billion people can be fed in 2050. The general framework that can be adapted to regional conditions. The food-based dietary guidelines for Germany (DGE 2024a) take into account not only an appropriate energy and nutrient supply, but also health and environmental aspects as well as the food choice and eating culture typical for Germany. The Commission continuously publishes new results of its work. The current EAT-Lancet Commission has set itself the goal of placing greater focus on the adaptation of regional and local diets, nutritional justice, and social food system goals (EAT Lancet 2025).

With Knowledge against poverty: the key to healthy and more sustainable nutrition for all

All transformation processes need to pay special attention to the vulnerable groups in our society. According to the Scientific Advisory Board for Agricultural Policy, Nutrition, and Consumer Health Protection (WBAE) at the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Regional Identity (BMLEH), around 3.5 percent of the German population, which means three million people, are affected by food poverty. Low-income households, single parents,

children, and older people have limited financial resources and find it difficult to ensure a balanced and nutritious diet.

There are many important tools for supporting these groups—nutrition education is one of them. It involves basic knowledge and skills about balanced nutrition, more sustainable consumption, and effective shopping strategies. Who understands how food is produced, what nutrients it contains, and how to process it carefully can make more conscious choices about the own diet. A promising way to raise such awareness are daycare centers and schools. Nutrition education focusing on quality and practical relevance teach skills at an early age with good chance for a more conscious approach to food in the long term. Anchoring relevant content in school curriculum, sufficiently trained staff, and everyday activities such as school gardens or cooking projects are major elements.

Home economics skills as key to more sustainable nutrition

A practical example of how nutrition education can help create equal opportunities and promote healthier and more environmentally conscious eating habits in the long term is the IN FORM project “Eating healthily and sustainably on a small budget – tackling food poverty together” (2024-2027). The joint project, funded by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Regional Identity (BMLEH), is being implemented by the European University of Flensburg and consumer centers throughout Germany and works closely with affected groups and multipliers, i.e., people who work with those affected by food poverty in professional, private, or voluntary contexts. The aim is to develop new formats for nutrition education through close cooperation that are tailored to the needs and requirements of the affected groups, reaching them in their living environments such as community centers, senior citizen facilities, or family education centers, and supporting them there.

Digitalization can contribute to sustainability in home economics

Digitalization and AI play a major role in today's change processes and can also make an important contribution to healthy and more sustainable nutrition, especially in terms of facilitating access for all. This ranges from personalized nutrition plans and specific educational offerings to AI-supported menu planning and data-based management of fair nutrition environments. However, digital skills must be strengthened, ethical issues clarified, and social and digital participation ensured—only then will the transformation succeed. Home economics and all those working in the field contribute significantly to health-promoting and more sustainable nutrition in countries like ours. They are in key positions to put knowledge into action and thus secure the future on our plates.

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Die International Federation for Home Economics (IFHE) ist eine weltweit anerkannte Nichtregierungsorganisation mit Beraterstatus bei den Vereinten Nationen. Sie wurde 1908 in der Schweiz gegründet und ist die einzige weltweite Organisation, die sich um die Belange der Hauswirtschaft, der Haushaltswissenschaften und der Verbrauchwissenschaften kümmert. Die Deutsche Sektion der IFHE ist als „Beirat für Internationale Fragen“ ein Gremium der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Hauswirtschaft e.