“Why did nobody tell me red, orange and green fruit and vegetables and organ meat are the best for me and my family! It is just so much simpler now that I know what to grow to feed to my family so they will be stronger!”
The activities in this section will involve volunteers talking to people in the community and explaining:

- Which foods are the most healthy and nutritious.
- Key messages about good nutrition and health practices.
- How people can be aware of health and nutrition services and how you can refer them to services.

The aim of the activities in this section is for volunteers to help people better understand which foods are nourishing and the importance of feeding the most nourishing foods to their families to keep them as healthy as possible.

What does the activity look like?

Adapt the nutrition messages to the people you are talking to, like these pregnant women in Zimbabwe.
What are the main benefits?

People gain knowledge about how to select and prepare more nutritious foods to help keep their families healthy.

People become aware that healthy nutrition is within their reach and they can challenge ‘food prejudices’.

People become better aware of the importance of certain foods, especially for the most vulnerable people.

Encourages the use of local foods and reduces dependence on foods from elsewhere.

Healthy food choices increase empowerment and self-respect, confidence and self-worth.

Good breast feeding advice helps to keep vulnerable babies safe, healthy and well nourished.
Preparations

Timing tips

✓ **Short awareness sessions, held often** – Nutrition awareness sessions should be short (about 20 minutes) and should happen regularly (once or twice a week). Talk to people about what suits them. The best idea is to do short nutrition awareness sessions as often as people would like them over a long period of time (months or years). The more you repeat the messages, the more people remember facts correctly.

✓ **Preferred timing** – Try to start at times of the day or year that are less busy for the specific group of people you are working with.

What does the volunteer need to do before the activity can start?

1. Follow the ‘Essential Guidance’ in the ‘Introduction’ of this handbook, on getting permission, organising meetings etc. Ask people or hold a meeting in the community to see if people think this activity is a good idea and to see who is interested in being involved.

2. Ask people if they would rather work in separate groups. Women and men might prefer to talk about some things separately. People who are chronically sick, or who care for the chronically sick, or people with HIV/AIDS, may benefit from specific tailored messages. You might choose to run a special session for breastfeeding mothers or mothers of young children. You might need to change the way you talk about things if you are trying to spread messages to children.

3. It is recommended that you select specific types of people to direct your key messages to. For example, if women or girls are usually involved in preparing foods or caring for children or sick or elderly people, they need to hear the relevant key messages. Everyone eats food though, so everyone needs to hear nutrition and hygiene messages!
4. House to house visits offer an opportunity for volunteers to assess and tailor messages to the specific needs of the family, but you need to be sensitive and respectful.

5. It is usually more effective if there is more than one volunteer involved. Try to make sure that you know as much as possible about nutrition and health before the activity starts. The IFRC Nutrition Guidelines (2013) is a good guide. Try to get a copy from the relevant person at national headquarters, or if you can get a copy printed it can be found at IFRC “Nutrition Guidelines”.

6. Make sure you are very familiar with the information in this section. It is a good idea for volunteers to run practice sessions on each other, to practice using the information. Volunteers should have knowledge of their communities (and their practices, habits, food etc.), and should try to find out which local foods have very high nutritional value (often elderly people know about traditionally rich wild fruits and vegetables).

7. It is recommended that volunteers visit and speak with some of the different types of nutrition and health service providers (nutritionists in the ministry of health, pharmacists, traditional birth attendants, community health workers, clinic staff, nurses, midwives or doctors etc.). It is important that you know what services are available so that you can refer people.

8. Local health workers may be willing to help guide your work and advise you as you get started.

How to avoid risks

It is important to discuss risks before you start the activity – there may be risks from people misunderstanding the nutrition messages. Discuss what are the most likely things that could go wrong? What ways can people think of avoiding these?
How to implement the activity?

Most of the messages in this section have been adapted from IFRC Nutrition Guidelines (2013) and are for the whole family. You will see that some of the messages suit certain groups of people more than others, such as young children or those who are sick or elderly:

**Step 1** Introduce why good nutrition matters

**Step 2** Spread 10 key messages slowly

**Step 3** Demonstrate a healthy diet and other activities in the community

**Step 4** Repeat simple messages, slowly and in lots of different ways

**Step 5** Spread the nutrition messages further

**Step 6** Follow-up to make sure advice is being followed safely
Step 1: Introduce why good nutrition matters

- Hygiene, health and nutrition are closely linked (see Section 8 on ‘Clean Water, Sanitation and Hygiene’).
- Around half of child deaths could be prevented if the child was not malnourished as well as sick.
- Good nutrition matters to make sure children grow well and for have good mental development.
- When children and adults are malnourished, they are more likely to get sick too.
- Malnourished mothers give birth to underweight babies, and when these children grow up they are more likely to have underweight babies themselves.
- HIV-positive adults need extra nutrients, especially when they are taking anti-retroviral medications.
- Adults who suffer from vitamin and mineral deficiencies are often tired and therefore less productive. This affects their ability to provide for their families.

A healthy diet is made up of a variety and balance of different types of food each day, including fruit and vegetables, cereals, tubers, roots, pulses, nuts, animal products and drinking water.

Step 2: Spread 10 key messages slowly

Below are 10 key messages that volunteers can slowly begin to share with community members. Don’t try to cover all the messages at once. Start slowly and keep repeating the messages in different ways, returning to each message lots of times. This helps people to remember and it is a way for you to check that they have understood the message correctly.

**Key message 1**

*A healthy and balanced diet* is full of flavour and colour. Food is made up of different kinds of nutrients that are essential for the body to function correctly, grow, fight illness and recover from disease. Encourage people to grow a wide range of different coloured fruits and vegetables to eat with their families (see Section 1 on ‘Gardens’).
Key message 2
There are 4 main food types for a healthy diet.

For a healthy balanced diet, try to eat foods from each of these four food groups every day.

- At least half a plate made up of staple (starches) foods such as cereals, roots and tubers, to provide carbohydrates.
- About a quarter of the plate should be meat/animal products (e.g. meat, eggs, fish or milk) and/or pulses (e.g. dried beans or lentils) to provide protein.
- About a quarter of the plate should be lots of different coloured local vegetables and fruits to provide vitamins and minerals (try to grow and eat different types – leaves, fruits and tubers – and colours – green, red, yellow/orange).
- Small amounts of oil or butter to provide fats.
- Water is essential.

Key message 3
Very small amounts of iodised salt should also be consumed to provide iodine (a mineral). Iodine-rich natural sources include:
- Milk
- Egg yolks
- Fish from the sea and other seafood.

Key message 4
Healthy snacks, such as fresh fruits, raw vegetables and nuts, and fermented foods, such as yoghurt, can be eaten between meals. Children under 6 months old should have nothing but breastmilk.
Key Message 5
Use simple and careful cooking methods to ensure nutrients stay in cooked and raw foods.

✓ Preparing and cooking fruit and vegetables

Raw fruits and vegetables are the richest sources of vitamins and minerals. They need to be cut or washed in safe water just before eating. The less fruit and vegetables are cooked are cooked, the more vitamins and minerals will be preserved.

Vitamins and minerals can be damaged by:
- Soaking vegetables and fruits for too long in water.
- Cooking vegetables and fruits for too long and with too much water.
- Cooking green vegetables with bicarbonate of soda.
- Cutting leafy vegetables with a knife instead of ripping the leaves into pieces.

The best way of cooking vegetables is by steaming them with a little water instead of boiling them. Leaves from vegetables such as spinach can be steamed for about five minutes in a sieve over rapidly boiling water. Leaves will need to be stirred with a wooden spoon so that all of them are exposed to the steam.

The boiled water from vegetables contains a lot of vitamins and minerals and can be added to a stew or used as a sauce, soup or drink.

✓ Preparing and cooking pulses

Pulses include sugar beans, fava beans, chickpeas/cowpeas, pigeon peas, soya beans and lentils. Pulses can take a long time to cook and use a lot of fuel. They can also cause bloating and gas in the stomach.

To reduce cooking time and gas effects, soak pulses overnight and skim off the foam produced during cooking with a spoon. See also tips in Section 11 on ‘Reducing Fuel for Cooking’.

✓ Preparing and cooking meat, poultry, fish and eggs

Fresh meat, poultry, fish and eggs contain more nutrients than products that have been processed and put in tins. Organ meat is particularly nutritious (liver, kidney, heart etc.). All meat, poultry, fish and eggs should be thoroughly cooked as they can cause food poisoning and salmonella if they are not completely cooked.

Young children, the elderly and people with chronic illnesses like HIV AIDs are at particular risk of these illnesses.
Key Message 6

Practice safe water, sanitation and hygiene measures to stay healthy (see Section 8 on ‘Clean Water, Sanitation and Hygiene’). When people are ill, they find it more difficult to absorb the nutrition they need from foods.

- **Water use** – follow the steps in Section 8 to ensure you use clean water.
- **Latrine use** - Latrines should be used instead of open defecation. Latrines should be located away from water sources and be kept clean and emptied or replaced regularly.
- **Hand washing** - People should have soap or ash and water for washing hands at critical times
- **Always wash food.**

Everyone in the family needs to hear sanitation and hygiene messages like ‘Everyone should use a latrine and wash their hands immediately’.

Try a ‘tippy tap’ for handwashing close to latrines and places where food is prepared and eaten.

Key message 7

Promotion of good nutrition for adolescent girls whose bodies are maturing and pregnant breastfeeding women who need to have an adequate variety and amount of food in their diets. Pregnant and breastfeeding women need one to two extra meals a day, along with plenty of safe water. Consumption of iron-rich foods like organ meat, eggs and green vegetables as well as iodised salt is also important.

Key message 8

Protecting and promoting best breastfeeding practices - Infants should be fed only breast milk for the first six months, starting within one hour of birth, with skin-to-skin contact. The thick yellow milk (colostrum) produced by the mother in the first few days after childbirth is very good for infants. No other liquids should be given to infants.

Key message 9

Promotion of best feeding practices for young children. In addition to breast milk, appropriate foods should be introduced to young children from six months. It is important to make sure that the texture or thickness of the food matches the young child’s ability to chew and swallow, especially in the early stages. A mashed, softer mix of the family’s staple foods with added mashed vegetables, fruits, nuts or meat or animal products is more nutritious for young children than giving them staple foods alone.
Key message 10
Promotion of good nutritional care of sick or malnourished children. Young children under the age of two are especially vulnerable to illness and malnutrition. Common illnesses, such as those caused by malaria, diarrhoea, intestinal worms and severe coughs or breathing difficulty, can cause vulnerability to malnutrition or make malnutrition worse. These illnesses should be treated by health workers. Use of mosquito bed nets and hand washing with soap or ash are simple but effective preventive measures. Infants or young children with diarrhoea should drink plenty of breast milk, and older children (over 6 months) should drink extra fluids, such as safe water.

Simple ways to prevent diarrhoea

Germs cause diarrhoea. Germs are small organisms often found in human and animal faeces or excrement that usually spread through contaminated water. Germs can also be spread by food, fingers and flies.

For the first six months, nothing but breastfeeding is the best way to protect the babies against diarrhoea. Do not give extra water to children under six months as it may not be clean and breast milk is best.

Simple ways to help prevent people getting sick include:

- Washing hands with water and soap or ash after touching poo/faeces/stools, after using the latrine or toilet, and before breastfeeding, preparing foods and feeding the child.
- Washing the child's hands with water and soap or ash often and keeping the child's play area and toys clean at all times.
- After six months, feeding the child with a clean, open cup. Feeding bottles are difficult to clean.
- Protecting food and drinking water from flies.
- Never eating leftovers of cooked foods after two hours, unless they are kept in a refrigerator.
- Keeping the child's finger nails cut short.

If a child under six months gets ill, keep using only breastmilk (unless advised by a trained health professional). If a young child over six months gets diarrhoea, the child should immediately be given extra fluids, especially breast milk. If the diarrhoea continues, visit a health worker.

Remember! The availability of health and nutrition services will be different from one country (or even district) to another. Some may be free of charge for children up to five years. Volunteers should get in touch with the available services, so they know what exists in their area and how to refer people to these services.
Step 3: Demonstrate a healthy diet and other activities in the community

- Eat a healthy diet in your own family and lead by example.
- Promote key nutrition behaviours and support demonstration activities for an adequate, varied and balanced diet.
- Work with community members to identify and address key challenges to hygiene, health and nutrition, with recommended behaviours at the household and community level.
Step 4: Repeat simple messages, slowly and in lots of different ways

One lesson on how to use these methods is not enough.
Keep messages simple and clear and keep repeating these in different ways. Here is a summary:

- Eat a variety of different foods.
- Include carbohydrates in every meal by eating staple foods such as grains and roots.
- Eat proteins, such as pulses, meat, fish or other animal products daily, as often as possible.
- Include fibres in diet by eating fresh, unprocessed foods every day.
- Include only small amounts of fats (oil or butter) in diet every day.
- Include vitamins and minerals in diet by eating plenty of vegetables and fruits every day and adding small amounts of iodised salt to every meal.
- Ensure a balance of all types of nutrients in diet.
- Use simple and careful cooking methods to ensure maximum nutrients are obtained from foods.
- Consume safe water and healthy drinks as part of a daily diet.
Keep repeating these messages in as many different ways as possible (meetings, leaflets, house visits, radio, school, clinics etc.).

Step 5: Spread the nutrition messages further

Once the volunteers and community groups are confident and used to running nutrition awareness sessions, they can run an awareness session in a community location such as on market day, with neighbouring communities or at schools, health centres or other institutions, to tell other people about the new methods and the ideas they have used that have helped them.

Step 6: Follow-up to make sure advice is being followed safely

Follow-up training and monitoring should be carried out after the initial training. Volunteers can monitor changes in the community in relation to:

- People’s satisfaction with the advice and methods.
- Are people using the advice and methods correctly?
- Are people’s other hygiene practices improving?
Things to watch out for

Discuss and find alternatives for local ‘prejudices’ about foods - it can be hard to challenge long standing local beliefs. Try to find out what local foods are forbidden. Some examples of messages that are not true:

- If a child eats egg before the age of five years they can become bald.
- If a pregnant woman eats fish, they will deliver a baby with the shape of a fish.

You can try to encourage people to challenge these beliefs or try to find other foods as alternatives from the same food group or category.

Be aware that often mothers and grandmothers can have a lot of influence about foods with their daughters-in-law, especially around how to feed their baby.

Top tips

- Keep repeating messages in different ways.
- Encourage people to share their ideas with others and neighbouring communities.
- Get advice from extension officers, health workers and other knowledgeable people.

Links to other sections in this handbook

This activity links well to the other sections in this handbook:

- Section 1 Gardens
- Section 5 Improving Farming Practices
- Section 8 Safe Water, Sanitation & Hygiene
- Section 10 Reducing Fuel for Cooking
Resources and skills needed

What resources are needed to run the activity?

- For volunteers - visual aids for awareness sessions are helpful but not essential.
- For people involved – food, water, soap or ash, time and effort.

Optional:
- Occasional meeting space.
- Record keeping book (list members, record any ideas or payments for shared resources or materials, etc.)
- Organise advice sessions or trainings from other experienced people or extension workers.
- Organise a cooking and tasting demonstration especially to encourage healthy types of food that might not be so popular (e.g. small grains). You can be imaginative with the recipes!

Who can provide advice?

Some people in the community will already have good knowledge and awareness of nutrition and can be asked to provide advice (local health workers, traditional birth attendants, government staff, or other non-government organisations or international agencies may be able to provide advice and support).

Approximate costs

Nutrition awareness can cost as little or as much as you want to invest. You may choose to invest in producing visual aids, pictures or leaflets to distribute, but you may decide to use other effective methods like demonstrations, theatre sessions and role plays or asking the local radio station to cover the key messages. It is important to monitor to make sure the messages are delivered accurately and safely.
What skills or knowledge do volunteers need?

- No specialist knowledge required, but you will need confidence to ask other people or health workers for advice. Can you persuade them to join you in running or supporting the activity?
- Motivating and organising people or helping people come to decisions in groups.
- Patience and persistence to clearly explain ideas and keep trying to help and support people.
- Volunteers should try to get a minimum level of knowledge on nutrition by reading this section or referring to the IFRC Nutrition Guidelines (2013) which is a good reference guide. Try and get a copy from the relevant person at national headquarters or if you can get a copy printed it can be found at: IFRC Nutrition Guidelines. Volunteers need to be able to answer basic questions from the community. You could try to participate in an awareness session in a health centre, or get advice from a health worker or Red Cross and Red Crescent trainings.

What skills do participants need?

No specialist knowledge needed. People will get advice from the volunteer and learn together and teach each other.

What needs to be monitored or followed-up?

Monitoring is optional, but sensitive follow-up to confirm that people are using the ideas and methods correctly and safely is important.