

TRADITIONAL INFLUENCES ON CONTEMPORARY ABORIGINAL DIET :
ANIMAL FATS AS VALUED FOODS

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Aboriginal people in the Sandover River region of Central Australia have a high regard for animal fats. Their view is grounded in traditionally derived notions linking animal fat with high-quality food, abundance and well-being. The associations are complex, multi-dimensional and often symbolic : fat is more than food.

The cultural value accorded animal fats is long-standing, certainly pre-dating the arrival of white Australians. Contact with the immigrant culture however, has created a situation in which there are expanded opportunities for people to realise the pre-existing cultural preference. Contemporary dietary practice reflects the continuing influence of the high value associated with fat. A major consequence of its persistence is the incorporation of new and different "fats" (including oils) in the diet. It underlies the rapid absorption of a new cooking technique - frying - which enables the addition of fat to meat in particular. As well, "fats" are applied to the skin for both medicinal and cosmetic effect.

The vastly changed dietary context, however, renders the traditional value problematical, at least in terms of its possible consequences.

At a more general level though, this situation demonstrates that the influence of traditionally derived nutritional perceptions requires (a) recognition and (b) exploration in the interests of minimising the health risks associated with dietary transition.

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