

To see how important food is for most people, have a look at the groups of people eating in a park on a national holiday. Eating is a primary human activity. We all need to eat because we feel hungry if we don't. Plus, prolonged periods without eating result in starvation and bodily damage.

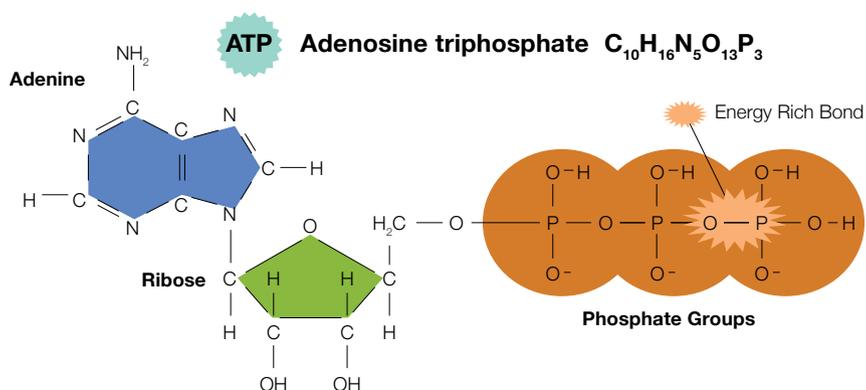
But food is even more than the nutrition it provides. Food is a basic aspect of human culture. In many celebrations, such as Thanksgiving Day, a meal serves as the focal point for a festive gathering of people.

Food is primarily nourishment, but to the human psyche, physical nourishment suggests the need for spiritual nourishment as well. Expressing Thanksgiving nourishes the soul, just as food nourishes the body. If we sit together, enjoy the presence of each other, tell stories, make plans, and then join in a meal, a snack, or a drink, our hearts can open. Sharing food together makes us more receptive and able to interrelate productively with one another.

In Jewish tradition each holiday has a special food that symbolizes the inner meaning of the day (FIGURE 1). While eating the food, we consciously internalize that meaning. On Pesach, the holiday commemorating our liberation from Egyptian slavery, we eat matzah—unleavened bread—symbolizing bondage and redemption. On Shavuot, the time of the Giving of the Torah, we eat dairy products, for the Torah is likened to milk. On Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, we eat an apple dipped in honey to symbolize our desire for a sweet year. On Chanukah, we eat latkes and cheese, reminding us of the heroism of Yehudit and the Maccabees. On Purim, we drink wine and eat hamantashen, commemorating the feast of Esther and the hanging of Haman.

Food and Energy

Why is food so important for our physical well being? Everything we do during the day, such as walking, working, playing, or even thinking, requires energy, and food is the substance which fuels our daily activities. A major component of food is the chemical glucose. We learned in an earlier chapter that cells convert glucose and other molecules into ATP, and ATP is the chemical fuel of the cell (FIGURE 2).



◀ FIGURE 2

ATP, Adenosine triphosphate

ATP is a chemical compound consisting of the nucleotide adenine, the five-carbon sugar, ribose and three phosphate groups. The breaking of the chemical bond between the second and third phosphate group releases a relatively large amount of energy that is used by the cell to fuel many energy-requiring processes