

Conclusion

This handbook summarises the effects of nutrition on the major dietary-related diseases and conditions. It also brings together information from a number of studies which have been carried out in Northern Ireland to examine dietary behaviour, awareness, understanding and attitudes to nutritional issues.

The current nutritional recommendations have also been summarised. However, communication of these recommendations is not enough to achieve dietary changes. Many other environmental, economic and cultural and social factors influence food choices and these must be considered by those involved in health promotion.

Some of the studies included in the handbook suggest that some dietary changes in line with recommendations have been made. However, it is clear that there is no room for complacency. A number of major issues remain, for example, the poor understanding and uptake of folic acid/folate to reduce the risk of neural tube defects in infants, the low rates of breastfeeding, premature weaning practices and the particular problems of low income groups in making changes to their eating patterns. If attention is given to these issues it will contribute to better health in Northern Ireland.

Action on these issues cannot be the work of any single group or organisation. The required changes will only be achieved if there is collaborative action across the wide platform of interested groups, including health professionals, the education sector, the food industry, voluntary and community groups. Eating patterns and beliefs in Northern Ireland have been established over decades. They will not, therefore, be changed overnight. This handbook on Nutrition is a reference book which highlights the main nutritional issues. The publication of *Eating and Health - A Food and Nutrition Strategy for Northern Ireland* provides a framework for action to improve nutrition and health in Northern Ireland.