



STUDY NOTES

EPISODE 23: TALKING ABOUT FOOD

Talking about Food

The topic of food and diet, meals and cooking may come up in the IELTS Speaking Test. It is useful to look at this topic area and think about how to select language and organise a response if asked to talk about food, diet, and customs around preparing food, cooking and eating it.

Consider various aspects of the topic and think of possible questions an examiner might ask. Make sure you include a variety of language functions. Don't forget to develop your vocabulary at the same time.

Preparing your answer

When preparing for the IELTS Test, whether for Writing or Speaking, it is helpful to brainstorm a variety of topics and issues – to begin to develop your own ideas, and build up possible responses.

Think of:

- possible topic areas
- possible questions including a range of language functions
- possible answers
- examples and reasons
- grammatical choices
- useful and related vocabulary

Possible topic areas

Consider the general topic of food. What aspects of this broad topic might you focus on? Make a list and develop your ideas so that if you have to respond to a question in the test, you are ready.

Think about:

- daily meals and staple
- between meal snacks
- cooking styles
- cuisines including fast food
- food and festivals
- exercise
- related topics - eating disorders, poverty and hunger

IELTS Tip

Vocabulary for food and cooking can be technical and specialist. Make sure you have sufficient language to be able to answer questions in IELTS on these topics.

Try to predict topic areas, question types and even particular questions, and begin to think about possible answers. Make sure you understand the difference between meals and staple. Be able to talk about what you eat and how. What type of food do you like? Can you cook? Should we learn to cook at school?



Daily Meals

In English, we identify three main meals of the day - **breakfast, lunch and dinner**.

What's the most important meal of the day? For some it is lunch because some people believe that it is not a good idea to eat a huge meal in the evening before going to bed. Some people skip breakfast, or have a simple quick **bite to eat** before leaving the house to go out, or to work or school – a glass of milk or fruit juice, a cup of coffee, a slice of toast, some cereal.

What do people in your country usually have for breakfast? In major hotels and on international flights around the world, two types of breakfast are commonly offered – Continental or English (or cooked) breakfast. These days Asian food choices are often included.

Staple

It is important to distinguish between meal and **staple**. Staple means the basic ingredient of the meal. For most people in Asia this is rice. For Italians it is bread and pasta, which is made from wheat.

In northern regions where the weather is drier, wheat replaces rice. In southern China, people eat a lot of rice, whereas in northern China wheat is the staple. In some European countries potatoes are a staple. The Italian staple, pasta, was introduced to Italy from China by Marco Polo.

Snacks – eating between meals, tea and coffee breaks

Some of us enjoy a snack between meals. In England there is the tradition of **afternoon tea** – English tea with scones and small sandwiches. This is also called **high tea**. In southern China, and especially HongKong, **yumcha** (called **dim sum** in North America) is a popular light meal, originally organised around a cup of Chinese tea. **Yumcha** actually means “drink tea”, in Cantonese.

Most of Mediterranean Europe place great importance on coffee – strong coffee prepared in a variety of ways with milk, steam and chocolate. The culture of coffee is quite developed in some countries or regions, whereas in others, for example the Middle East, Russia, the United Kingdom and most of Asia, it is tea, again prepared in many different ways. It is common in these countries to have a small cake or a slice of cake, or a biscuit with the coffee. Chinese tea, or green tea, is served black (ie without milk). The Japanese tea ceremony is a very elaborate affair. Americans have a coffee break.

Cooking styles

Styles of cooking vary from country to country, region to region, house to house, and family to family.

There are many different ways to prepare food – **boil, steam, fry, grill, bake and roast**. Some preparations are quick and simple; others can be complicated and slow. Some baked dishes can take 24 hours of slow cooking. The American turkey, a central part of the Thanksgiving meal in North America can take many hours to prepare and cook properly. The English Christmas cake can take several days to prepare and cook.



Cuisines

There are not only different ways to prepare and cook food, but also different styles, or cuisines. It is possible in many large cities around the world now to find restaurants specialising in particular cuisines – **Thai, Italian, Japanese, Lebanese, Turkish, Chinese, Korean, French** and so on. Some cuisines are very **spicy**, for example Szechuan style from China, or Thai food. Cuisine means not only how the food is prepared, cooked and served, but also what is eaten, including combinations of ingredients, herbs and spices.

Food and festivals

Another topic area is festivals and the place of food in these festivals. Some cultural festivals are religious and have great significance for the family. They usually involve food, particular food cooked and presented in a particular way.

Chinese New Year is a very significant time for most Asians. This is a time, like Christmas for Christians, or Ramadan for Muslims, when the family comes together, and shares a meal.

Be prepared to talk about the significance of food at particular times of the year, at large and important festivals such as Christmas or Easter (for Christians), or the Autumn Moon Festival (for Chinese). Sometimes some festivals require **fasting** instead of eating, such as the period of Lent for Christians or Ramadan for Muslims.

Exercise

To remain healthy and fit we need to manage not only what we eat but also how much and what kind of exercise we get. There is a strong link between food, diet and exercise to ensure we live healthy and long lives.

Nutritionists tell us that we should have a **healthy, balanced diet** – meaning a mix of various foods – red and white meat, fish, fruit and vegetables. The food should be fresh. We should monitor the amount of salt and sugar in our diets. We also shouldn't over-eat – obesity is caused by eating too much, and eating the wrong kind of food in the wrong proportion, and prepared using too much oil or fat. Some processed foods and fast food or junk food can be unhealthy because it contains high quantities of salts, sugars, fats and oils.

As people become busier in their day to day lives, at work or when married with families and related commitments, they may begin to either eat out, or depend on take-away food. This helps explain the increase in the number of restaurants, but also in the variety and number of take-away food choices, such as McDonalds, KFC and so on.

Many busy restaurants also have a **take-away** function. A lot of food in Asia can be described as **fast food** – noodles from a noodle stall, steamed buns from a corner street stall. Just because the food is fast or take-away (**take-out** in North America) doesn't necessarily mean it is "junk" (ie rubbish) or unhealthy.



Poverty and hunger go hand-in-hand. Economic development often brings employment, and ready money. Having enough money means being able to beat hunger. Many of the world's poor countries have significant numbers of their people who do not have enough food. What obligations do developed and wealthy countries have to reduce or eradicate hunger in the world?

Possible Questions

Draw on the different topic areas covered above to extend your answers on the possible topic area of **food**. When we think about the various aspects of food, questions and points of discussion present themselves.

Topic area	Question
Diet	What is a healthy diet?
Cooking	Do you cook or eat out a lot? Who does the cooking where you live? Should we be taught cooking at school?
Fast food	What's the difference between take-away , fast food and junk food ? Is take-away food always unhealthy? Will people depend on fast food more in the future? What are some of the advantages of fast food?
Eating habits	Do you eat on the run – grabbing something and running for the train or bus, or to a meeting? Do you eat alone, or always with a group – your family, or with your workmates at lunch time? Do you prefer to eat alone or with a group? When you eat, how do you eat – with a knife and fork, with chopsticks, with your hand?
Food supply	What are some reasons why people in the world go hungry? What are some ways we can ensure no-one goes hungry in the world? Should wealthy countries feed the poor of the world?
Eating disorders	Why do you think some people are allergic or intolerant to certain foods? How can we better manage our weight? Do you think some people take dieting too far? Are some people becoming obsessed with what they eat? How important is exercise?



Questions and Language Functions

Be sure to consider a range of questions requiring a variety of language functions. Practising the grammar of different language functions will help you better prepare for the IELTS Speaking interview.

Question	Language Function
Describe the main meal of the day?	Describing
What is the main meal of the day?	Identifying
Do you think it is better to have three regular meals through the day or one large main meal?	Giving an opinion
What do you usually eat?	Describing
Will people eat more take-away food in the future?	Speculating

We could put some of these questions together to make a prompt card for Part 2 of the IELTS Speaking Test:

Talk about your diet and what you eat. You should say:

- What you usually eat?
- What is the main meal of the day?
- Who does the cooking where you live?

and explain why it is important to have a balanced diet.



Topic Vocabulary

So, think of the various aspects to the topic of food, meals, cooking and diet. Collect vocabulary around these topic areas.

Topic	Vocabulary
Meals	breakfast, lunch, dinner snacks, morning coffee, afternoon tea, supper eat in, eat out
Staple	rice, potatoes, wheat (in bread or pasta) – carbohydrates
Food types	meat, fish, vegetable, fruit, grains, protein, fat, fibre, herbs, spices
Beverages	tea, coffee, soft drinks, beer, wine, champagne fruit juices – orange juice, apple juice, pineapple juice
Cooking styles	boil, steam, fry, deep fry, stir fry, bake, roast, grill, broil (North American) home delivery, take-away, take out (North American), fast food, junk food
Cuisines	Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Indian, Thai, Italian, French, Spanish, Lebanese, Mexican vegetarian, vegan
Utensils	cooking – pots, pans (sauce pans, frying pans), kettles, woks, dish (baking dish) oven, stove, range, hot plates, microwave oven, bar-be-cue, griller cutlery (knife, fork, spoon), chop sticks crocery - Chinaware, cups and saucers, plates, bowls
Food contents	fat, carbohydrates, oil, protein, fibre, sugar, salt
Allergies, Eating disorders	allergic, allergies, intolerance, bulimia, bulimic, anorexia, anorexic, lactose intolerant obesity, starvation, hunger, famine addiction
Eating and dieting	biting, nibbling, chewing, tasting, drinking, savouring, swallowing, digesting, processing fasting, dieting, over-eating, indulging