

Food for thought

Food quality and quantity are key elements in ensuring the health of a seafarer. But has the introduction of the MLC had an impact on the quality of the food or the health of seafarers?



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Global obesity has nearly tripled since 1975. According to the 2016 statistics of the WHO (World Health Organization), more than 1.9 billion adults, 18 years and older, were overweight and 650 million were obese.¹

As of June 2018, cardiovascular diseases accounted for the most deaths in the category of non-communicable or 'lifestyle' diseases, with 17.9 million dying every year.²

Regulatory considerations

The introduction of the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) 2006 set clear responsibilities for shipowners/managers in relation to food for seafarers. It has three basic principles/minimum standards regarding the provision of food on board:

1. Catering staff shall undergo the necessary training for their positions.
2. Meals provided should be adequate, varied, nutritious and served under hygienic conditions.
3. Food should meet religious requirements and cultural practices, and 'shall be suitable in respect of quantity, nutritional value, quality and variety'.

These guidelines are quite general and open to interpretation in their implementation depending on the degree of training and experience of the cook, and their cultural background.

Enforcement and training

Cooks are undergoing formal training courses that highlight nutrition. However, will this be an assurance that the seafarers they cook for will choose to eat the prepared food that is good for them? Is it an assurance that the seafarer will not only eat the right food but the right amount as well and avoid overeating when tired, hungry and stressed?

In addition to the training of cooks, shipping companies are also investing in the education of their seafarers by including health topics in officers and crew conferences, and providing educational material prior to departure and while on board.

¹ <http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/noncommunicable-diseases>

² <http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/obesity-and-overweight>



The impact (or lack)

Among seafarers, being overweight or obese and the presence of other cardiovascular risk factors (ie smoking, eating an unhealthy diet) remain common problems that appear to be on the rise.

Currently, there is no evidence showing the effect of MLC 2006 on the quality of food or the health status of seafarers. It may be more realistic to look at regulations such as the MLC 2006 as supportive of these choices rather than relying on them to be the engine that powers the change that makes our seafarers healthier.

What is certain is that MLC 2006 alone will not solve the health issues amongst seafarers relating to food and lifestyle.

What can seafarers do?

Ultimately, the health of each seafarer remains primarily with the seafarer making a personal choice to live a healthy lifestyle, such as avoiding unhealthy foods that are high in sugar, salt, and saturated and trans fats; eating the right amount to fuel the body without overeating; choosing to be more physically active; ceasing smoking; and dealing with stress and fatigue in positive ways.

What can shipowners/managers do?

Shipowners/managers can aid seafarers in their efforts by ensuring that both the spirit and the letter of MLC 2006 is implemented on their vessels and by promoting behaviours that will benefit the seafarer, such as moderation and healthy eating.