



The Role of Traditional Diets in a Healthy Lifestyle

What do the traditional diets of Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Mediterranean have in common? They are all healthy ways of eating.

Although they may vary in ingredients and flavor profiles, these diets share a plant-based eating pattern that includes lots of vegetables and fruit, whole grains and pastas, beans and legumes, nuts and seeds and small amounts of lean meats and fish. They include healthy fats such as those found in olive and sesame oils as well as plenty of herbs and spices in lieu of salt.

Ongoing studies have shown that nutritious whole foods can be the first line of defense against illness. But, when there's a shift away from traditional diets and an acculturation of the western diet, weight gain and development of diseases can occur more frequently. In fact, within a span of a generation, a traditional way of eating and its health benefits can be lost. The good news is when a healthier diet is adopted, improvements in health can be made easily and quickly.

The following studies illustrate the importance of traditional diets for good health.

Traditional African Diet May Reduce Colon Cancer

Colon cancer, the second leading cause of cancer death in the US, affects a greater proportion of African Americans than rural Africans, indicating that diet plays an important role in disease prevention. To see how traditional diets affect risk factors for colon cancer, researchers assigned 20 middle aged African Americans to a traditional, African heritage diet (averaging 55g fiber daily and 16% calories from fat, with foods like mangos, bean soup, and fish) and 20 middle aged rural South Africans to a typical American diet (averaging 12g fiber daily and 52% calories from fat, with foods like pancakes, burgers, fries, and meatloaf). In just 2 short weeks, the African Americans reduced the inflammation of their colons, improved their markers for cancer (including increased levels of butyrate, an anti-cancer chemical), and increased the diversity of their healthy gut bacteria. On the other hand, the rural Africans eating an American diet fared worse, producing more bile acid (a risk factor for colon cancer), while decreasing the diversity of healthy gut bacteria. These results indicate that an African heritage diet can help promote a healthy digestive tract (potentially reducing colon cancer risk), and that rapid improvements can come with a change to healthier foods.

Nature Communications. 2015 Apr 28;6:6342. (O'Keefe SJ et al.)

Traditional Diets Compared to Standard American Diet are Lower in Sodium

High sodium intake is associated with higher blood pressure. This study, from Loyola University in Chicago, examined 2,704 individuals from Nigeria, Jamaica, and the United States, with evaluated blood pressure and sodium levels. The individuals' ages ranged from 31-48 and 55% were women. Sodium levels decreased from West to East: highest in the U.S., mid-range in Jamaica, and lowest in Nigeria where we find little added sodium in the foods. High blood pressure follows the same pattern: highest in the U.S., mid-range in Jamaica, and lowest in Nigeria. The standard American diet, containing foods higher in sodium, is associated with a higher risk of abnormal blood pressure than traditional diets.

Journal of Human Hypertension. 2011 May 19. (Tayo et al.)



Haitians in Montreal Who Leave Traditional Diet Are Less Healthy

People's eating patterns are greatly influenced by where they live. This study examined the eating patterns of 181 adult Haitians living in Montreal to measure the quality of their diets, as they transitioned from traditional Haitian lifestyles to a more North American way of life. Diet quality was broken down into a categorical spectrum, spanning from "Traditional" to "Western." The researchers found that people who ate a "Traditional" diet, which was lowest in cholesterol and total fat, tended to be older and to have lived in Montreal for the shortest periods of time. The longer a person had lived in Montreal, the more "Western" their diet became, exceeding the recommended limits of total fat and cholesterol intake. Overall diet quality was significantly healthier in the "Traditional" diets than the "Western" type. The study concluded that it is important to encourage youth to retain their healthy traditional food cultures no matter where they live.

Public Health Nutrition. May 2007. (Désilets et al.)

Traditional Latin American Diet May Help Explain the Hispanic Paradox

Studies show that Hispanics live longer and have lower rates of heart disease than Non Hispanic Whites, despite a higher prevalence of risk factors for heart disease and mortality. This phenomenon has been dubbed the "Hispanic Paradox." In a recent journal article, researchers suggest that the traditional Latin American diet may be a possible explanation for this relationship. Compared to the general U.S. population, Hispanics eat more legumes and fruit, foods known for their antioxidant activity and heart healthy properties. According to the researchers, another lifestyle factor that may have a protective effect on health is the high level of social and familial support in the Latin American culture.

Progress in Cardiovascular Diseases. 2014 September 4. Pii: S0033-0620(14)00133-9.

Mexican Diet Largely Lost in One Generation

Researchers at the University of North Carolina compared the diets of 5678 Mexicans, 1488 Mexican Americans born in Mexico, 3654 Mexican Americans born in the U.S., and 5473 non-Hispanic Americans. They found that the three groups in the U.S. ate more saturated fat, sugar, pizza, fries, meat, fish, high-fiber bread and low-fat milk and less low-fiber bread, tortillas, high-fat milk and Mexican fast food. Although acculturation had both positive and negative food elements, overall calories from unhealthy foods were higher in the U.S. and the influence of the Mexican diet was lost in one generation.

The Journal of Nutrition. October 2011; 141(10):1898-906. (Batis et al.)