



NUTRITION FACT SHEET # 8

FOOD, CULTURE AND TRADITIONS

Food is one of the most important and enduring aspects of tradition and culture. People connect to their culture or ethnic group through the foods that they eat and as people migrate and families move to other locations, food practices and preferences may change. Throughout the world, food is used to celebrate holidays, rituals, and family gatherings. Food is a source of pleasure, comfort and security. Food is also a symbol of hospitality, social status and religious significance. Our culture often determines what, when, and how we eat. These traditions connect us to our history, our place, and to one another.

People in different countries eat different types of foods. What may be considered acceptable or even a delicacy in some parts of the world might be considered unacceptable in other parts. In countries such as Bangladesh, India and Pakistan common foods are rice, lentils and curry. Other cultures have traditional breads with their meals.

Some cultural food beliefs and practices are influenced by religious convictions or beliefs. Around the world many followers of the Muslim faith observe Ramadan. During this month long event, Muslims fast during daylight hours, eating and drinking only before dawn and after sunset. Many followers of Buddhism or Hinduism are vegetarians, as abstinence from eating meat and fish in these traditions stems from the desire to avoid harming other living creatures. Despite religious food expectations, dietary practices can often vary widely even among those who practice the same faith. Such variances may be due to different beliefs within branches of a religious group or the individuals' or families' own degree of religious adherence.

The way people eat can differ depending on their cultural background. Some people eat with forks, knives and spoons, others use fingers or chopsticks. Among some cultural groups who primarily eat with their fingers, only the right hand is used to eat, with some only using three fingers of the right hand. Among other cultural groups, the use of both hands is acceptable. The tradition of using chopsticks for eating was introduced by Chinese people who migrated to other countries including Vietnam and South Korea.

Culture also plays a part in food related etiquette, or what may be referred to as '*table manners*' in Western society. In Chinese culture it is disrespectful to start eating until the host has offered some words of greeting and in other cultures there is a practice of prayer before and after meals. Many cultures also practice the respectful tradition of serving elder family members and male members first. The amount of the meal or food served that people eat also varies. People from Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian countries might leave a little bit of food on their plates in order to indicate that their hunger has been satisfied. However, other cultures may be offended if food is left on the plate as it may indicate that the food was disliked.

Food plays an important role in the lives of families in most cultures and in most parts of the world is associated with hospitality and expression of friendship. Therefore, sensitivity to food related rules and customs is important in building and strengthening cross-cultural relationships.

Sources

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