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FACT SHEET: FOOD CULTURE OF INDIA

Diet and Health Concerns

- 14.5% of population undernourished⁷
- 33% children and adolescents (5-19 years of age) are underweight.⁸
- 50% of adults are underweight.⁸
- Malnutrition main risk of death in 68% of children <5 years of age.⁸
- 85% of population experiencing vitamin D deficiency^{9,10}
- >70% population vitamin B₁₂ deficiency¹⁰
- ~30% children under 5 years of age vitamin A deficiency¹⁰
- >50% of children and women anemic⁷
- Non-communicable diseases NCDs and injuries account for more than 60% of loss of a healthy life.¹¹
- Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is leading cause of death¹
- Obesity growing concern as number of cases rise among those living in India's urban areas versus its rural parts.^{1,12}
- Obesity affects more women than men.^{1,12}

Food and Religion

- Hindus represent almost 80% of India's population, equivalent to more than 980,000 of its residence, and is expected to steadily rise in number between now and 2050.¹³
- While fasting is not required of Hindus, it is seen and observed as a way of cleansing the body and mind to create space for divine grace. The day/s and degree of restriction is dependent upon personal, family and community beliefs, and does not necessarily mean going without food.¹⁴
- Ekadashi is the most common observed day for fasting, occurring twice a month and is based on the moon's ascension and descension.¹⁴
- While fasting is a form of showing offering and sacrifice to a higher power, it is also believed to bring strength and purity.²

Traditional Foods & Dishes

While foods of Indian cuisine can be diverse across the country, rice, wheat, pulses (dried lentils, beans, and chickpeas), ghee (clarified butter), milk, yogurts, and spices are country staples.¹ Whether following a vegetarian or non-vegetarian diet, there is a higher consumption of carbohydrates compared to that of fruits, vegetables, and meats.¹ During festivals and holidays, a meal is considered incomplete without traditional mithai (sweets).¹ These sweet treats are made from sugar, milk, and ghee, ingredients all considered pure, allowing for the mind and body to focus.^{1,2,3}

- A wide variety of spices are used in cooking of meals, including cumin, turmeric, cardamom, cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg, fennel, and saffron.^{3,4}
- Traditional Indian meals: tandoori fish, mutton dosas (crepe made from fermented rice and lentils stuffed with lamb meat), vegetable curry noodles, and Jain pizzas (vegetarian pizza)⁴
- ~70% of the country consumes a **non-vegetarian** diet where chicken, goat, and buffalo meat are consumed occasionally⁵
- 25% of population **lacto-vegetarians** a diet that includes, cereals, pulses, vegetables, fruits and dairy⁶
- Slightly more than 1% are **vegan**, consumption of no animal products⁶



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Current Food Practices

- Influence of Western foods and eating habits along with modernization of food production in India, is creating a transition from a traditional diet to one consisting of more processed and convenient foods¹⁶
- Consumption of meat has more than doubled over the past 10 years⁶
- Indian families still place a high value on eating home cooked meals²
- Indian immigrants directly associate eating out with increase in body weight.²
- Indian immigrants see refrigerators and freezers in a negative light. Leftover foods are not common in India, and it is believed that the reheating of food is bad for one's health.²
- While immigrants try to maintain cooking traditional Indian foods, it is not pushed onto their children so that they can better assimilate to Western ways. As the multigeneration children of Asian-Indian Americans continue to expand their culinary taste, they are beginning to influence how older generations eat.²

Traditional Health Beliefs

- Mohandas Gandhi believed use of pharmaceutical medicines to be immoral and unethical.¹
- Cows are sacred and represent prosperity. Ghee (a dairy product made from cows) provide energy, nourishment and strength.^{1,17,18}
- Drinking cow urine can cure illnesses like heart disease, asthma, arthritis, migraines, and high blood pressure.¹⁹
- Drinking tea made from boiled basil leave will reduce a fever.²
- Sugar mixed with water or a sherbet eliminates an allergic reaction.²
- Bananas cause colds.¹⁵
- mangoes cause diarrhea.¹⁵



Traditional Eating Patterns

- Foods are organized under 3 categories: 1) **Satvika**, these foods are considered pure and allow the mind and body to focus, they include cooked vegetables, milk, fresh fruits, and honey. 2) **Rajasika**, are foods that provide the energy needed for daily activities, and include cereals, pulses, vegetables, and fruits. And, 3) **Tamasika**, are the foods believed to create stress within the body and bring out an individual's poorer qualities. These foods consist of meat, alcohol, garlic, and spicy and sour foods^{2,3}
- Traditional foods are specific to what crops are in season, and because India has six seasons, vasanta ritu (spring), grishma ritu (summer), varsha ritu (monsoon), sharad ritu (autumn), hemanta ritu (fall winter), and shishira ritu (winter), it is important to know what foods are available during the different times of the year.^{3,4}
- Two full meals (breakfast and dinner) with generous sized snacks are consumed daily.¹⁵
- Breakfast includes rice or bread, a pickled fruit or vegetable, and a dal (split lentils, peas, and beans) dish.¹⁵
- Dinner includes a rice dish, curried vegetable, legume or meat dish, a vegetable legume side dish, baked or fried bread, a pickled fruit or vegetable, a yogurt rayta or pachadi (yogurt dips containing vegetables and seasonings)¹⁵
- Guest are served first at mealtime¹⁵
- It is believed that eating with your hands brings a deeper connection to the food one is going to eat, using thumb and first two fingers of your right hand to pick up and eat the food. Washing hands before and after eating is expected.⁴
- Flatbread or banana leaves are used to scoop up curries, vegetables and meat⁴
- To minimize the trauma and suffering to an animal, the method for procuring animal meat is called Jhatka, which consist of beheading the animal with one stroke from sword or axe⁴



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