

VIETNAMESE FOOD & CULTURE

FACT SHEET

Traditional Foods and Dishes

Traditional Vietnamese foods are rice, sesame, peanuts, tofu, green vegetables poultry and fish. Fruit is expensive in Southeast Asia and is regarded as a high-status food. Fresh milk is typically unavailable.¹ Rice is eaten in multiple ways like noodles, paper for spring rolls, flour and vinegar. Favorites are curries, peanut sauces, coconut milk and caramel flavor.²

Buddhism is widespread throughout Vietnam, and as such, many Vietnamese do not eat meat, seafood, chicken or eggs on the first and middle days of each lunar month.



Pictured: Pho-A Vietnamese staple food salty broth, fresh rice noodles, herbs and chicken or beef.

Traditional Eating Patterns

Vietnamese people eat two or three meals a day. Snacking between meals is uncommon. Breakfast is typically large and may consist of soup with rice noodles topped with meat or poultry; a boiled egg

with meat and pickled veggies on French bread; rice gruel with bits of meat and veggies; or boiled sweet potatoes with sugar, coconut, and chopped roasted pecans. Lunch and dinner include similar foods such as rice, fish or meat, a vegetable dish, and a broth. Fish sauce, fresh and pickled vegetables, and other condiments accompany the meal. All items are served at once. Hot tea is the preferred beverage and is served before and after meals but not during the meal. In late afternoon, tea or coffee may be enjoyed with a sweet treat or piece of fruit.²

Traditional Health Beliefs

The Vietnamese are accustomed to a more paternalistic approach to health care delivery. In Vietnamese society health care professionals are authority figures who are well respected. The Vietnamese not only will expect absolute guidance from health care professionals but also will comply without contesting or questioning their decisions.³

One belief during the new year is that when a watermelon is cut open, the redder the flesh, the more luck the family will have in the upcoming year.² Many Vietnamese follow the yin yang theory of diet, and foods must be balanced within a meal.² The yin and yang of foods views cold foods as negative energy and hot foods as positive energy foods.

Traditional Vietnamese medicine includes many indigenous folk therapies and herbal medicines and practices. Many of the practices are based on the belief that

illnesses are caused by “toxic wind” that enters the body from outside. With acute conditions, such as pain, the Vietnamese frequently use techniques to remove the “toxic wind”, such as “wind snatching” that uses fingers to pinch and snap away the skin.

For more severe, chronic conditions, the patients are often treated with home-prepared herbal teas and soups prescribed by doctors. For more common problems, patients purchase ready-made manufactured products, in the form of pills, powders, or extracts. To maintain health, Vietnamese also consume raw, dried, and fresh herbs thought to have health protection quality, as well as packaged health tonic products that are mostly herbals that are claimed to improve general health. In the United States, nearly these products can be bought from local grocery stores and farmer’s markets.⁴

Current Food Practices in Vietnam and The United States

Immigrants in the U.S. may come across challenges of acculturation, including dietary habits, as they adjust to new surroundings.⁵ Changes in access to food may explain dietary changes among immigrant Southeast Asians in the United States. Increases in dairy and fresh fruit and vegetable consumption occur after emigration to the United States.¹

After emigration to the United States, the number of meals consumed per day decreases. Intake of vegetables decreases significantly. Foods from the meat group decrease significantly.¹

The composition of the diet of a large proportion of the population has shifted to include lower amounts of starchy staples, greater amounts of protein- and fat-rich

foods and higher energy content.⁷ The traditional dietary pattern of a proportion of the urban population has shifted towards including more fast foods with eating outside of the home and more energy dense-nutrient poor foods like sugary foods.⁷

	All Children	Ethnicity Analysis			Gender Analysis		
		Vietnamese (n = 15)	Hispanic (n = 48)	Kruskal-Wallis p-Value ¹	Boys (n = 31)	Girls (n = 31)	Kruskal-Wallis p-Value ¹
Sweet Snacks	19.0 (7, 34)	12.5 (7, 20)	22.0 (7, 39)	0.160	23.0 (8, 39)	13.0 (7, 26)	0.157
Fruits	15.0 (8, 26)	13.0 (7, 22)	15.5 (8, 29)	0.262	21.0 (9, 33)	13.0 (7, 22)	0.043
Veggies Plus	7.0 (4, 20)	7.0 (4, 13)	7.5 (4, 21)	0.951	11.0 (5, 37)	6.0 (3, 15)	0.069
Fast Food	6.0 (3, 16)	8.0 (3, 15)	6.0 (2, 21)	0.853	9.5 (4, 23)	4.0 (2, 14)	0.029
Other Veggies	2.0 (0, 8)	7.5 (1, 10)	2.0 (0, 7)	0.185	2.0 (0, 14)	2.0 (0, 8)	0.648

¹ Probabilities are statistical significance of Kruskal-Wallis test for differences in consumption of foods in each factor by ethnicity and gender. One Vietnamese child whose gender was unknown was not included in the gender analysis.

Vietnamese Dietary Guidelines⁸:

1. Eat a variety of foods and frequently change the menu.
2. Early breastfeed the baby just after birth and exclusively breastfed for six months.
3. Consume protein-rich foods with a balance between animal and plant sources, promote fish consumption.
4. Control fat consumption and maintain a balance between animal fat and plant oil sources.
5. Using milk and milk products according to the age group.
6. Avoid salty foods and use iodized salt for daily food preparation and consumption.
7. Eat more fruits and vegetables everyday.
8. Maintain the hygiene and safety of food and beverages.
9. Drink enough the water, limit alcohol, beer and sweet beverages.
10. Choose an active lifestyle, increase physical activity, maintain your weight, and avoid smoking.

References

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