

Nutritional status

13% of households are food insecure.⁶

29% of children under 5 and women are anemic.⁷

1 in 5 children are short for age.⁷

40% of men and women are malnourished.⁶

Common deficiencies: vitamin A, iron, iodine, and zinc.^{6,7}

Mortality rate for children under age 5 is 16 per 1,000 live births. Nearly 45% attributed to malnutrition.⁷

Traditional foods

Daily meals consist of boiled rice, a bowl of stock with vegetables and a plate of meat, fish or tofu and a plate of vegetables. Limes, chilis, and herbs are always available.³

The dishes are arranged on a round tray. No beverages are consumed before or during the meal to ensure enough room to fill up on rice.³

Meals are eaten with a pair of chopsticks and a spoon. Large spoons are used for serving stock and rice. Each person uses their own chopsticks to grab a piece of meat or vegetables, cut into bite-size pieces, off the serving tray.³

Diners hold their rice bowl up to their mouth and use chopsticks to push rice in. Soup is eaten with a spoon and chopsticks. Use chopsticks to push noodles onto the spoon.³

Fact Sheet

Vietnam Food Culture

Vietnamese cuisine brings in elements of Chinese, French, and Indian cuisines, but maintains its own identity.



Market in Hue, Vietnam // © Quynhanh Do

Markets bring the community together

Markets bring a rich sense of community to cities and towns of Vietnam.¹ The markets open early. By 6 a.m., the streets are full of people in cafes, eating, cooking, or selling baguettes.² Bữa ăn sáng [breakfast] is bought at the market and eaten away from home.³ A common dish is xôi [rice with meat, mushroom, onion or shrimp].

The markets close around 10 a.m. and open again around 4 p.m. for women of the family to buy food for bữa trưa [lunch] and bữa tối [dinner]. Snacks are commonly purchased at the afternoon market. After dinner, mobile vendors sell snacks of pho, won-ton soup or bún, a by-product of rice.³

Hot, humid climate, fresh meals

Historically, food spoiled quickly in the warm temperatures, so freshness became a hallmark of Vietnamese cuisine.³ Even with refrigeration, the taste for fresh food persists. The Việt want their food as fresh from the ground or sea as possible.³ Families cook two hot meals per day. Meals are eaten quickly with no leftovers.³

Demand for fresh food leaves little time for enforcement of hygiene at open-air markets.⁴ Food safety is a concern especially with poultry.⁵ When a police officer appears, vendors pick up quickly. When the officer leaves, sales resume.³

Special meals

Anniversary of a death

Vietnamese culture believes in feeding the soul of the departed. Before anyone eats, a small portion of each dish is placed on an altar as an offering to ancestors.³

Family feast

Families may gather for an elderly relative's birthday, Lunar New Year, a wedding or a funeral. The meal is a noisy affair that lasts hours.³

8 dishes are shared. 4 on plates, 4 in bowls. Xoi is a starter. The plates might include cold meats, boiled chicken or duck, eggs, salad, and pickles. The bowls hold soup and braised dishes.³

Family members sit with others from their generation. The top table is for the highest-ranking man who will carry on the family name.³

Tết (Lunar New Year)

The most important holiday in Vietnam, celebrates the arrival of spring. Foods include bánh chưng [rice cake with mung beans and pork], bánh dày [white rice cake], canh măng [bamboo soup], giò [sausage in banana leaves], and sticky rice.

Bún thang, an elaborate and delicate noodle soup, is served 3 days later to send off the souls of ancestors who came to celebrate with the family.³

Nutrition and health concerns

- Vietnamese residents have high rates of gastrointestinal cancer, which could be from the process of polishing rice that uses asbestos. Always wash imported rice.⁸
- Medical care is often sought only after home remedies have been exhausted. That means conditions are often advanced.⁸
- A belief says that good health comes from balancing hot and cold. Foods and ailments are considered to be either hot or cold. Skin problems are hot and should be treated with cold foods, like rice, fruits, vegetables, or fish. Diarrhea is cold and should be treated with hot foods like meat, spices, and sweets. This might be contrary to what American nutritionists recommend.⁸

Vietnamese immigrants in America

Moving to America negatively impacts diet quality. Immigrants consume less grains, fruits and vegetables while consuming more fat, cholesterol, sodium, soda, prepared and fast food.⁹

Calcium intake is of particular concern for women. Lactose intolerance is common and it's difficult to find familiar sources, like tofu, canned fish, fish sauce, dried shrimp, and greens in America.⁹

Nutritionists are encouraged to help Vietnamese immigrants re-create their eating patterns with food available. Việt diets are rich in fruits, vegetables, complex carbohydrates, and low in fat. Việt eat about two cups of rice with most meals.⁹ Vegetable consumption is among the highest in the world in Hanoi at 290 grams per day.⁴

Because Vietnamese immigrants have expressed interest in increasing their children's height, nutritionists have replaced the sweetened condensed or coconut milks used in Vietnam with dairy.⁹

Challenges in America include a new measurement system, women are less likely to stay home, and distaste for food isn't fresh.⁹

The evolving diet in Vietnam

Economic growth after 1986 brought significant changes to the traditional Vietnamese diet, improving incidence of low height and underweight. Now higher amounts of starch, protein, and fat-rich foods are consumed. The nation is simultaneously experiencing undernutrition and obesity.¹⁰ Since 2011, 5% of children and 8% of women are overweight. Twice as many women are still underweight.⁷

References

1. Nguyen L. *Food of Vietnam*. Richmond, Victoria, Australia: Hardie Grant Books; 2013.
2. Chon KS. *Vietnam Tourism*. New York, NY: Haworth Hospitality Press; 2005.
3. Lien VH. *Rice and Baguette: A History of Food in Vietnam*. London, UK: Reaktion Books; 2016.
4. Wertheim-Heck SCO, Vellema S, Spaargaren G. Food safety and urban food markets in Vietnam: The need for flexible and customized retail modernization policies. *Food Policy*; 2015;54:95-106. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2015.05.002>. Accessed February 2, 2019.
5. Nhung NT, Van NTB, Cuong NV, Duong TTQ, Nhat TT, Hang NTH, et al. Antimicrobial residues and resistance against critically important antimicrobials in non-typhoidal Salmonella from meat sold at wet markets and supermarkets in Vietnam. *Int J Food Microbiol*. 2018; 226:301-309. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29275223>. Accessed February 1, 2019.
6. Vietnam Nutrition at a Glance. World Bank. <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/NUTRITION/Resources/281846-1271963823772/Vietnam.pdf>. Accessed February 1, 2019.
7. Nutrition Country Profiles: Vietnam. Nutrition and Consumer Protection Department of United Nations. http://www.fao.org/ag/agn/nutrition/vnm_en.stm. Accessed February 1, 2019.
8. Purnell LD. Traditional Vietnamese health and healing. *Urol Nurs*. 2008;28(1):63-7. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18335701>. Accessed January 28, 2019.
9. Ikeda JP, Pham L, Nguyen KP, Mitchell RA. Culturally relevant nutrition education improves dietary quality among WIC-eligible Vietnamese immigrants. *J Nutr Educ Behav*. 2002;34(3): 151-158. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1499-4046\(06\)60084-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1499-4046(06)60084-5). Accessed January 28, 2019.
10. Pham THQ, Worsley A, Lawrence M, Marshall B. Awareness of nutrition problems among Vietnamese health and education professionals. *Health Promotion Int*. 2017;32(5): 840–849. <https://doi-org.une.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/heapro/daw016>. Accessed February 1, 2019.