

Indian Cuisine: Food & Culture Fact Sheet

INDIA

Located in Southern Asia



Pictured is roti, an Indian bread.

India has several different regions and each region has unique dietary patterns.¹ Varying cuisine is influenced by religious and culture factors, as well as the availability of local foods.¹ Depending on the region of India, preparation of traditional foods may vary.²

A traditional Indian diet is considered healthy because foods are filled with antioxidants and are high in dietary fiber.³

Traditional Foods and Dishes

Traditional meals in India are generally plant based, incorporating a lot of grains, vegetables, fruit, and dairy.³ In India, grains, sorghum, and finger millet are considered to be staple foods.²

Some staple dishes² that incorporate grains are...

- *Idli* [fermented rice and black gram batter] which is prepared by steaming, and the finished product tends to be white and has a spongy texture.
- *Enduri pitha*, a cake [parboiled rice, black gram, turmeric leaf, coconut curd, and sugar], is yet another fermented dish that is prepared by

steaming. This dish is typically prepared during the Prathama Tami festival.



Pictured is idli, a savory rice dish.

Some staple fruits and vegetables² that are used in the preparation of Indian food consist of...

- *Bael fruit* [leaves and fruits from the tree] is used primarily for the treatment and relief of diarrhea by preparing it into a beverage from the pulp.
- *Jamun fruit* [different parts of the plant are used; leaf, bark, seeds, and pulp] to help treat diabetes and allergies.
- *Papaya salad* [grated green papaya, coriander seeds, turmeric powder, and sugar] is a side dish that is eaten as a traditional breakfast dish. Papaya trees are used to treat diarrhea, bleeding piles, jaundice, and enlarged liver.

Milk-based health foods have nutritional qualities that cannot be found in other food sources.² Some of the major milk products of India include ghee, cheese, and buttermilk.²

Staple foods that are prepared from milk-based sources² are...

- *Dahi* [boiled buffalo or cow milk] is traditional Indian yoghurt.
- *Ginna* [milk, sugar, and cardamom] is an Indian sweet.

Traditional Health Beliefs

Dietary patterns in India focus on the Ayurvedic system of medicine.³ The Ayurvedic system focuses on using natural methods to achieve wellness.³ Ayurveda's main principle focuses on healing through proper diet and exercise rather than relying on Western medicine.² Traditional Indian culture consults spiritual healers before getting the opinions of doctors who practice Western medicine.⁴

Religious Influences

The most influential religions are the Hindu and Muslim traditions.⁵ The Hindu tradition of vegetarianism is a widespread practice throughout India even though many Hindus are beginning to consume meat.⁵ The Muslim tradition focuses primarily on cooking meat products.⁵

Holiday and Festival Foods

- **Laddu** [flour, dough, and sugar] combined with thinly sliced **barfi** [condensed milk, sugar, and gram flour] are prepared a month before the Diwali festival, the Hindu festival of lights.⁶
- **Gujia** [sweet dumplings stuffed with milk powder] are prepared for Holi which is the Hindu spring festival where color powders are thrown.⁶



Pictured is two girls celebrating Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights.

Traditional Eating Patterns

Indian meals typically contain fat, carbohydrates, and are rich in fiber.³

India has a wide range dietary patterns that differ in each region because ingredients of locally available crops are used.^{1,3}

Across all regions, dietary patterns often incorporate and adopt a traditional vegetarian approach with lots of fruits and vegetables, as well as high-fat and high-sugar from snacks and sweets, as well as meat.^{1,7}

In India, what are considered **two** full meals are typically consumed with significant snacking between.⁷ The two main meals are breakfast and dinner. Breakfast typically includes “rice or bread, pickled fruits and/or vegetables, and a dal dish.”⁷ Dinner is considered to be the main meal of the day and dishes typically consists of curried vegetables, bread, rice, and meat.⁷

The entire meal spread is placed on the table at once and individuals are typically served with rice or bread.⁷ For beverages, the most common to be consumed with meals are water and milk.⁷ When eating a meal hands and utensils are both used, however, only of the right hand.⁷

The regions that have the most differences are northern and southern India.⁷

Northern India

Northern India is known for staples like roti and naan, pickled fruits and vegetables, eggs, garlic, aromatic spices, and yogurt raytas.⁷

Southern India

Southern India is more commonly known for the use of spicy seasonings.⁷ Staples in South consist of seasoned yogurt, fresh fruits and vegetables, rice, and coffee.⁷

References

1. Green R, Milner J, Joy EJ, Agrawal S, Dangour AD. Dietary patterns in india: A systematic review. *Br J Nutr*. 2016;116(1):142-148. doi: [10.1017/S0007114516001598](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007114516001598)
2. Sarkar P, Lohith Kumar DH, Dhumal C, Panigrahi SS, Choudhary R. Traditional and ayurvedic foods of Indian origin. *J. Ethn. Foods*. 2015;2(3):97-109. doi: 10.1016/j.jef.2015.08.003.
3. Shi J, Ho CT, Shahidi F. *Functional foods of the east*. Vol 10. Baton Rouge: CRC Press Inc; 2010. <https://doi.org/10.1201/b10264>
4. Worthington RP, Gogne A. Cultural aspects of primary healthcare in India: A case- based analysis. *Asia Pacific family medicine*. 2011;10(1):8. doi: 10.1186/1447-056X-10-8.
5. Food in India. <http://www.asianinfo.org/asianinfo/india/food.htm>. Accessed May 31, 2020.
6. Mouthwatering Indian holiday and festival food. UPB Products. <http://upbproducts.co.uk/2015/03/30/mouth-watering-indian-holiday-festival-food/>. Published March 30, 2015. Accessed May 31, 2020.
7. India. Adoption Nutrition. <http://adoptionnutrition.org/nutrition-by-country/india/>. Accessed May 31, 2020.

Image Credits

1. Yokota T. *Roti*. Flickr; 2014. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/albertus/15687946227/in/photolist-pUhPRv-B2Xxdq-2hUX9qq-uSbbyf-2iKfVVc-2iF3pHM-GBvh-AwaRpi-qg27U7-rpq3Fu-26ETWex-q8Aw7m-2gaanMc-i6EU Ae-4AwceB-q4RmMm-hcHHrV-dzZY4R-eNfDX-cG6xxj-624S3e-2hWafYf-UTiARo-DmyoR7-7PkVdN-XNkjWs-2i8GyuD-rqR9H1-624RWZ-2heEU-r6VUHE-7Dp83N-KEcRKu-xywZC7-8TGcf6-YHKuaE-vRAQmR-boKBAC-2iPT1b5-2hqBLXs-dnXNDJ-QgnJ9Y-d3a2Z7-pSELLJ-2iSt9Qc-JHGMui-YwaXoJ-ARpGG-8nkxn-2bXbGJd>. Accessed June 7, 2020.
2. *Idli*. WebMDikimedia Commons, the free media repository; 2020. https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Idli_-_A_Traditional_Indian_Food.JPG&oldid=401702260. Accessed June 9, 2020.
3. *Diwali*. Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository; 2019. https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Diwali_Festival.jpg&oldid=371714365. Accessed June 9, 2020.

FACT SHEET