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Cultural Diversity: Eating in America African-American

The present day African-American population, like many other ethnic groups, is several generations removed from their original land. Thus many practices and habits have been lost, dropped, simulated, or modified. The greatest influence on many African-American families is the lifestyle of their parents or grandparents who lived in the southern United States.

Acceptable Nomenclature

Acceptable nomenclature for this cultural group include African-American, Black Americans, or People-of-Color. People-of-Color is preferred by many when addressing groups or discussing issues that affect several ethnic groups.

Food Habits and Their Relationship to Dietary Guidelines

Historically, African-American rites revolved around food. The society is based on religious ceremonies, feasting, cooking, and raising food. The popular term for African-American cooking is “soul food.” Many of these foods are rich in nutrients, as found in collard greens and other leafy green and yellow vegetables, legumes, beans, rice, and potatoes. Other parts of the diet, however, are low in fiber, calcium, potassium, and high in fat. With high incidence of diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and obesity, some African-Americans have paid a high price for this lifestyle. Economically disadvantaged families may have no other choice but to eat what is available at low cost. Fresh fruits and vegetables, lean meat, and seafood

are not as readily available at low cost. The presenter or educator may want to discuss ways of obtaining quality foods despite economic limitations, such as growing small gardens in community sites; shopping at roadside garden markets; shopping at large supermarkets rather than small corner stores; developing budgeting clubs and food co-ops; and participating in food bank programs.

Eating Practices, Food Preferences, and Food Preparation Techniques

Common ways for African-Americans to prepare food include frying, barbecuing, and serving foods with gravy and sauces. Home-baked cakes and pies are also common.

Teaching Implications

Educators or presenters should focus on the way food is prepared, encouraging families to provide low-cost, nutritious alternatives by modifying the sodium, fat, and sugar content of traditional foods. Simple changes in diet might include substituting herbs for high sodium seasonings, increasing the amount of vegetables and decreasing the amount of meat, removing the fat and skin from meat, and eating more fresh vegetables and fruits. Cutting calories and eating smaller portions should also be encouraged. Some families may resist change because of family traditions. If this is the case, ask them to submit a list of their favorite foods and recipes and then discuss how to modify them. Any opportunity to include information on exercise and

teaching their children and teenagers good nutrition should also be taken. Any stereotyping or assumptions that “all” African-American people like the same foods and have the same lifestyle should be avoided. Neither do “all” adhere to poor diets, have no concern about their health, have bad cooking habits, or lack nutritional understanding and health education. Taboos about child rearing and nursing are usually common or adhered to if older grandparents are heads of households. Few teenage African-American mothers breastfeed, but it is common with older mothers. Infant feeding methods vary with pressure from parents when babies are crying. Young mothers might give cereal along with formula because they think the infant is hungry.

Customs and Family Traditions

Many African-Americans are Protestant and have no specific food restrictions. However, a large number of families are members of religious groups that may have some restrictions or dietary preferences. These may include Seventh-Day Adventists, Muslims, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and others. This should be discussed openly.

Special Holidays

A large selection and variety of food is prepared and much attention is given to individuals’ favorite dishes. Besides all the formal and traditional American occasions and holidays, a large number of African-Americans observe and celebrate Kwanza, an African-American cultural holiday created by Dr. Maulana Karenga of Southern California in 1965. Kwanza is celebrated December 26 through January 1. Karamu, held on January 31, is celebrated with ceremonies, a buffet, and festive attire.

Some African-American churches frown on wearing slacks and shorts in the worship area or sanctuary, though wearing them is acceptable in the recreation area.

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Cultural Diversity: Eating in America

Cultural diversity is a major issue in American eating. To fully understand the impact cultures play in American nutrition, one must study both food and culture. This fact sheet on the African-American culture is one of a series of nine developed to address cultural diversity in American eating.

This fact sheet is designed as an awareness tool for a novice working with a cultural group previously unknown to them. Given the nature of the variations that exist in each cultural group (i.e. socioeconomic status, religion, age, education, social class, location, length of time in the United States, and location of origin) caution needs to be taken not to generalize or imply that these characteristics apply to all individuals of a cultural group. This fact sheet was designed primarily for use in northeastern Ohio, but may stimulate awareness of differences in these cultural groups in other parts of the country. The goal of this fact sheet is to assist a novice educator in reducing any cultural barriers that may inhibit education. The author strongly recommends continued reading and additional research into the cultural groups in which you work.

References

Jones, Paul. *The Blackheath Library Guide to Heart Disease and Hypertension*. Henry Holt and Company, Inc, New York, NY.

Additional resources addressing cultural diversity in nutrition education:

- *Cross-Cultural Counseling: A Guide for Nutrition and Health Counselors* (FNS 250). U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Kittler, P., and Schuer, K. (1989). *Food and Culture in America*. Van Nostrand & Reinhold, 1989.
- *Nutrition, Food, and Culture*. National Livestock and Meat Board, Chicago, Illinois.

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