



HYG-5251-95-R10

## Cultural Diversity: Eating in America

# Amish

**T**he Amish are often referred to as the plain people, known for their unadorned style of dress, horse-drawn vehicles, and family-centered lifestyle. A strong faith in God and church traditions determine their ways.

Ohio has the largest settlement of Amish in the United States; Pennsylvania ranks second and Indiana ranks third. The largest communities in Ohio are in Holmes, Wayne, Ashland, and Geauga counties. Each of the groups within the Amish culture—Old Order Amish, New Order Amish, Mennonite, Beachy Amish, “Swiss” Mennonites, or Swartzentruber Amish, for example—have their own set of rules about what is acceptable from the world around them.

### Food Habits and Their Relationship to Dietary Guidelines

Eating habits vary among the Amish depending on where they live, the type of work they do, and the mode of transportation they use. Traditionally the Amish community has been farm-based with families growing or raising most of their own food and traveling by horse and buggy. This pattern is changing in urban areas, however, because of the scarcity of land and hazards of horse-and-buggy travel. Many Amish are leaving their farms, and gardens are becoming smaller.

Most Amish, especially those who still tend large gardens and orchards, eat a variety of foods. Because much of their work is physically demanding, many are not concerned about reducing the amount of fat in their diets. Those with access to motorized transportation buy more high-fat snack foods and eat out in restaurants more often than those who travel by horse and buggy.

Breads and cereals are usually made from whole grains and served often. In some families, cakes and cookies are available at most meals; in others, sweets are limited.

High cholesterol and blood pressure may be a concern. However, because the Amish do not visit the doctor often, many ailments are not detected until a serious problem arises. The Amish do not carry health insurance or accept any type of public assistance.

### Eating Practices, Food Preferences, and Food Preparation Techniques

Most Amish do not have electricity in their homes. For cooking, many use either wood or kerosene oil stoves. They cool their food in ice boxes, spring houses, or their basements. A minority have freezers.

The Amish prepare most of their food from scratch, but some also use mixes and instant foods. They preserve all of their own fruits and vegetables and much of their meat by canning. Homemade bologna is popular and is usually made without the casing. Some Amish will occasionally purchase frozen foods as a change of taste or as a treat. Many rural families have their own milk cow and make cheese, cottage cheese, yogurt, and ice cream. Those near urban areas usually buy these items at the supermarket or cheese houses.

Many farm families eat cornmeal mush—made from oven-roasted field corn—for breakfast. Eggs and cooked cereal are other typical breakfast foods. Fruits or juice may be included.

The main meal of the day typically consists of noodles, macaroni, or potatoes; meat, which is often fried; and canned vegetables. Homemade or supermarket-bought

bread is served at every meal. The lighter meal commonly consists of soup, cheese or bologna, and fruit. Snacks are usually apples, cookies, or leftovers.

### Teaching Implications

Because of their desire to remain separate from the world, sharing information and new ways of doing things with the Amish can be difficult. Very few have telephones and most do not attend public meetings. Going to their homes, places of business, or schools may be the best method of contact. Because the man is the head of the household, he should be approached first. In some groups, going through the bishop may be necessary.

### Customs and Family Traditions

Family life is extremely important to the Amish; many have large families (10 or more children). Children are viewed as gifts from God. Many women breastfeed their babies; others bottle-feed. Many Amish make their own baby food by grinding a portion of the family's meal. Some will purchase instant baby cereals. Milk is not always served to the children as a beverage, but is used on cereals and in cakes and cookies.

Because of their lack of exposure to the outside world (including radio, television, and magazines), Amish children are influenced solely by their parents' and extended family's eating habits. However, as more young people are forced to seek jobs in the outside community, their food experiences and traditions are changing.

Traditions are important to the Amish, but kept simple compared with "English" (the term Amish people use to describe the non-Amish) standards. Many Amish hold church services and weddings in their homes. The meals that accompany these events are special times for socializing. The Amish celebrate Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, and birthdays with traditional foods, but with few decorations or gifts.

Original author: Patricia Shenberger

### 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 Amish 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

- Faber, Doris. *The Amish*, 1st Edition. Doubleday, 1991.  
 Meyer, Carolyn. *Amish People: Plain Living in a Complex World*. Atheneum, 1978. Seitz, Ruth Hoover. *Amish Ways*. RB Books, 1991.  
 Pellman, Kenneth, and Scott, Stephen. *Living without Electricity*, People's Place Booklet #9. Good Books, 1990.

### 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.

## EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION

Visit Ohio State University Extension's web site "Ohioline" at: <http://ohioline.osu.edu>

Ohio State University Extension embraces human diversity and is committed to ensuring that all research and related educational programs are available to clientele on a nondiscriminatory basis without regard to race, color, religion, sex, age, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, or veteran status. This statement is in accordance with United States Civil Rights Laws and the USDA.

Keith L. Smith, Ph.D., Associate Vice President for Agricultural Administration and Director, Ohio State University Extension  
 TDD No. 800-589-8292 (Ohio only) or 614-292-1868