



# FACT SHEET

## Family and Consumer Sciences

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## Cultural Diversity: Eating in America Hmong

**T**he Hmong people are from rural mountain areas in Laos. They are divided into clans or tribes that share the same paternal ancestry. Each clan has a leader who oversees all relations and a shaman (wise man/medicine man) who deals with spiritual and physical problems. Hmong education is oral, which leads many Americans to mislabel them as illiterate.

### Food Habits and Their Relationship to Dietary Guidelines

The Hmong staple food is white rice. Their diet is enhanced by a variety of vegetables, fish, meat, and traditional spices. They eat three meals a day. Snacking is not part of their native culture.

Typical daily meals might include:

- **Breakfast**—light soup with rice, pumpkin, vegetables, chicken, or pork (eaten very early)
- **Lunch**—nonglutinous rice, fried or steamed meat, pork, chicken, or beef (eaten at 12:00 noon or before)
- **Dinner**—same as lunch (eaten late evening)

Most of a Hmong's daily calories are from the carbohydrates/grain group. Native vegetables are also consumed in large amounts. The Hmong diet could be enhanced with the addition of a variety of inexpensive, available vegetables. Meats and fish are used in small amounts as enhancements. The amounts are sufficient, however, to provide ample protein. Popular fruits are bananas, mangoes, pineapples, coconuts, lichees, and jackfruit. As with vegetables, additional varieties of fruit could enhance the Hmong diet. In particular, citrus fruits should be emphasized for their vitamin C content.

Fresh milk and cheese are typically unavailable to Hmong in their native country. This, along with lactose intolerance, discourages the consumption of dairy products. Overall fat content in the diet is low. Relatively few households in Laos eat sweets. Most are not equipped with ovens to bake desserts. A steamed rice cake may be eaten occasionally.

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

Hmong food is usually home grown. Meats are usually fresh, home butchered, and shared among clan members to keep storage time short.

Hmong meals are served in a communal style. Food is placed (and replenished) in the middle of the table, and each person eats from the center with a spoon or fork. Using fingers to eat is impolite.

Cooking methods include stir-frying, boiling, steaming, and roasting over an open fire. Vegetable oils and pork fat are the principal fats used in cooking. Food is usually chopped in uniform pieces before cooking.

Seasonings are an essential aspect of Hmong cooking. Fish sauce and soy sauce, both of which are high in sodium, replace table salt. Hot peppers, ginger, garlic, coriander, coconut, and lemon grass contribute to the robust flavor.

### Teaching Implications

Hmong people are a very happy and hospitable people. Many times in teaching situations they will constantly nod and say, "Yes." Keep in mind that this means, "Yes, I am listening to you," not, "Yes, I understand."

Hmongs do not feel comfortable with direct eye contact and do not like to be touched on their heads. This is linked to their animist religion, and is not a sign of low self-esteem or disrespect.

### Customs and Family Traditions

Hmongs follow an animist religion. They believe in spirits in all places and every aspect of life.

Hmongs also have close family and clan relationships. The clan leader and the shaman are important and respected. Clans will move to the same area in the United States to keep that closeness. Minnesota, Wisconsin, Ohio, North Carolina, and California have large clan groups. The shaman is similar to a psychologist, doctor, and minister. It is very important to gain his respect.

Mothers nurse infants for one to two years. An infant's first solid food is rice flour and water made into a gruel. This may be started as early as one month but other foods are not introduced until one year. During pregnancy and lactation many women do not increase their caloric intake. Many do not include milk in their diet.

### Conclusion

The Hmong people have experienced an enormous cultural change in their move to the United States. No longer can they have the fresh variety of food available in their homeland. Because they were orally educated, a trip to the grocery store is quite difficult. For example, pictures on labels do not necessarily reflect the contents of the package and are often misleading.

The Hmong mother is caught between her husband who wants homeland cooking and her children who are becoming "Americanized" and expect her to cook American meals. Hmong women are best taught by hands-on lessons. They are a willing group of learners.

### Cultural Diversity: Eating in America

Cultural diversity is a major issue in American eating. To fully understand the impact cultures play in

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American nutrition, one must study both food and culture. This fact sheet on the Hmong 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

Individual and group interviews conducted with Hmong population at International Institute, Summit County.

*The People and Cultures of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam*. Language and Orientation Resource Center, Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, DC.

### 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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