



# FACT SHEET

## Family and Consumer Sciences

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## Cultural Diversity: Eating in America Middle Eastern

The countries of the Middle East include Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Turkey. Although the cuisines of these countries are similar, each culture has distinctly different eating practices, food preferences, and food preparation techniques.

Thousands of Middle Easterners live in the United States. Middle Easterners emigrate for political reasons, advanced schooling, and because of the prior emigration of other family members. The many students and professionals who emigrate from these countries often come from affluent families and are cosmopolitan in their food habits. As with other immigrant groups, the length of stay in the United States correlates with the degree of Americanization of the diet. Traditional dishes tend to be prepared and eaten for special occasions.

### Food Habits and Their Relationship to Dietary Guidelines

Foods common among all of the Middle Eastern cuisines include dates, olives, wheat, rice, legumes, and lamb. Bread typically accompanies each meal.

Common food consumption includes the following:

- **Dairy Products**—Most dairy products are eaten in fermented forms, such as yogurt and cheese. Whole milk is used in desserts and puddings. Feta cheese is the most commonly consumed cheese.
- **Meats**—Lamb is the most widely eaten meat. Pork is eaten only by Christians and not by Muslims or Jews. Many Middle Easterners will not combine dairy products or shellfish with the meal. Kosher beef, kosher

poultry, herring, lox, and sardines are also common foods. Legumes such as black beans, chick peas (garbanzo beans), lentils, navy beans, and red beans are used in many dishes.

- **Breads and Cereals**—Some form of wheat or rice accompanies each meal. Matzoh, unleavened bread, and pita bread are common and readily available in American food markets. Filo dough, which is used to make baklava, is also used in many dishes.
- **Fruits**—Fruits tend to be eaten as dessert or as snacks. Fresh fruit is preferred. Fruits made into jams and compotes are eaten if fresh is not available. Lemons commonly are used for flavoring.
- **Vegetables**—Eggplant is the most commonly consumed vegetable. Fruit and vegetables are preferred raw or mixed in a salad. Many times vegetables are stuffed with rice or meats. Green and black olives are present in many dishes, and olive oil is most frequently used in food preparation.

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

Grilling, frying, grinding, and stewing are the most common ways of preparing meats. A whole, roasted lamb, or leg of lamb is a special dish prepared for festive gatherings. Spices and seasonings are essential in the preparation of Middle Eastern dishes. Common spices and herbs include dill, garlic, mint, cinnamon, oregano, parsley, and pepper. Olive oil is preferred in food preparation.

While Americanized Middle Easterners prefer an American-type breakfast and lunch, dinner is more traditional. Recipes have been altered to require less preparation time, less fat, and fewer spices.

### Teaching Implications

The ability to work effectively with persons from culturally diverse backgrounds, such as those from the Middle East, is important. Many people from these cultures observe Muslim and Eastern Orthodox religions, which influences the kinds of food chosen and/or how the foods are combined. Muslims do not eat any form of pork or meat that has been slaughtered without mentioning God's name. Muslims cannot drink alcoholic beverages or foods flavored with alcohol. Middle Easterners have a high incidence of lactose intolerance, and therefore fresh milk is not widely consumed. The wide use of olive oil in food preparation attributes to a diet high in monounsaturated fatty acids and a culture commonly known for lower blood pressures.

### Customs and Family Traditions

The Middle Eastern culture centers around a strong patriarchal family. This has lessened since their emigration to the United States but family ties are still strong.

Food is an integral part of family celebrations, special days of honor, and festivals. The Kosher dietary laws concerning selection, preparation, and eating of food remains influential in the Jewish religious and family life. The Jewish laws of Kashrut, or keeping Kosher, determine which foods are Kosher and non-Kosher.

Many ancient practices and rituals, handed down from generation to generation, are observed. Fasting from sunrise to sunset is a Muslim religious obligation practiced during Ramadan.

Body movement such as touch is allowed only between the same sex. Body language and eye contact remain an important tool in effective communication.

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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 Middle Eastern 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

- Ethnic and Regional Food Practices*. American Dietetic Association and American Diabetes Association.
- Kittler, P., and Schuer, K. (1989). *Food and Culture in America*. Van Nostrand & Reinhold, 1989.

### 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.
- *Nutrition, Food, and Culture*. National Livestock and Meat Board, Chicago, Illinois.

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