



FACT SHEET

Family and Consumer Sciences

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Cultural Diversity: Eating in America Puerto Rican

The Puerto Rican culture includes people whose ancestors and possibly current extended family members are from the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico. Their original language is Spanish. Under Spanish rule and then under American rule, Puerto Rico has never been an independent nation. Puerto Ricans are American citizens and can legally enter and leave the mainland. Migration flows circularly between the island of Puerto Rico and the mainland. Because of this circular migration, elements of both cultures thrive in both places, and a specific Puerto Rican “cultural type” is difficult to describe.

Food Habits and Their Relationship to Dietary Guidelines

The typical Puerto Rican diet has many positive aspects. This diet is high in complex carbohydrates such as breads, cereals, soda crackers, rice, and corn meal.

A typical diet also includes some calcium and milk products. Adult women will drink milk in *cafe con leche* (coffee with milk) and consume calcium in *flan* (custard).

Incomplete proteins, such as those as found in legumes, rice, and beans, are often eaten. Meats eaten include chicken, pork sausage, turkey, beef, pork chops, spare ribs, and marinated pork. Fish is eaten, but in quantities smaller than other meats.

When available, *viandas* (starchy vegetables) are also included in the Puerto Rican diet. *Viandas* include plantains, green bananas, *taniers*, white and yellow sweet potatoes, and *chayote* squash. Lettuce salads with tomato are popular.

Increasing the calcium intake and the varieties of vegetables would improve the typical Puerto Rican diet. The diet is generally high in calories, complex carbohydrates, fats, and sodium.

Almost 70 percent of the food on the island of Puerto Rico is imported from the United States. Because of this, the Puerto Rican diet—particularly the diets of younger generations—has become very Americanized. Favorite foods include pizza, hot dogs, canned spaghetti, cold cereal, and canned soups. Fast food restaurants are also popular. Some Puerto Rican families living on the mainland shift away from traditional dietary patterns. Others maintain their ethnic food patterns after living on the mainland several decades. Bilingual children can play a major role in promoting dietary changes and modifications.

The population has a tendency toward high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes (three to five times higher than the general population), cancer, arthritis, gastrointestinal disorders, and obesity.

Nutritional objectives should involve the following: encouraging selection of foods from all food groups; drinking plenty of water; maintaining ideal body weight; encouraging the use of low-fat dairy products; encouraging the consumption of unsugared fruit juices; teaching a greater variety of preparation styles; and introducing a greater variety of vegetables. The population should also be discouraged from eating sugar and simple carbohydrates, and using excessive fats in cooking.

Eating Practices, Food Preferences, and Food Preparation Techniques

Puerto Rican foods are not spicy like Mexican foods, but they do have a mild, distinctive taste. They frequently use a seasoning called *Sazon*, which is mostly MSG. Other common seasonings are *annato* (a yellow coloring similar to saffron), *cilantro*, and *sofrito* (a seasoning sauce used in cooking made from lean cured ham, onion, green pepper, *cilantro*, and garlic sauteed in oil).

Teaching Implications

Teachers may benefit from developing a trust relationship and engaging learners on a personal level. For example, when passing out papers, hand them to each individual rather than passing them down the row. This will show that “personal touch.” Also, do not be offended if you are asked personal questions. Puerto Ricans typically like to touch and feel close (both physically and emotionally) to those around them.

Enlisting the help of a member of the community—such as an elder or older woman, both of whom are well-respected—may benefit your presentations. An indigenous educator who speaks the language is also beneficial. When using written materials remember that many people cannot read English or Spanish.

Possible meeting places may include churches or English-as-a-Second Language classes. Teaching the women may be easier. Frequently, however, the men’s support is needed before the women will listen.

Customs and Family Traditions

Respect for family is critical in the Puerto Rican culture. Mothers and elders are adored, and duty to the family—including the extended family—is essential. Family ties are strong. Families often gather for holidays, birthdays, and weddings. Machismo is a critical element of the society. Women usually make decisions on foods purchased and served. Traditionally meals are served when the entire family is together.

Breastfeeding is frequently practiced. Puerto Ricans believe breastfeeding is nourishing and creates bonding between mother and child.

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 Puerto Rican 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

- Common Puerto Rican Foods, Herbs and Spices.* (1992). New Jersey State WIC Program, New Jersey State Department of Health.
- Looker, A., Loria, C.M., Carroll, M.D., McDowell, M.A., and Johnson, C.L. (1993). Calcium intakes of Mexican American, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Non-Hispanic Whites and Non-Hispanic Blacks in the United States. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, Volume 93:11, pp. 1274–1278.
- Sanjur, Diva. (1995). *Hispanic Foodways, Nutrition, and Health.* Allyn and Bacon Publisher.
- Warrix, M., et al. (1993). *Cultural Competencies: A Nutrition Wellness Model.* Concurrent session at the Ohio Association of Home Economics annual meeting.

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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