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5 Healthiest Habits on the Planet

Learn five nutritious habits of the planet's healthiest countries—then use our tips to give your diet a boost.

By Lia Huber



CLICK ON PHOTOS TO ENLARGE
Eat Plenty of Produce and Whole Grains



CLICK ON PHOTOS TO ENLARGE
Savor Leisurely Dining



CLICK ON PHOTOS TO ENLARGE
Practice Portion Control



CLICK ON PHOTOS TO ENLARGE

If you've vacationed in an international destination, you know that learning about its food is one of the best ways to become familiar with a new culture. But lately, Americans have also taken greater interest in global cuisine because of health benefits attributed to certain styles of eating. Books, such as *The French Diet: The Secrets of Why French Women Don't Get Fat*, by Michel Montignac, and ongoing nutrition studies of the so-called Mediterranean diet and Asian foods continue to garner new headlines. We've sifted through the research to offer the following eating and meal-planning tips. Making small changes in the way you eat can bring big health benefits—and more enjoyment—to your table.

Healthy Habit #1

Eat Plenty of Produce and Whole Grains

Countries known for putting it into practice: China and Greece

In many countries, meat is a garnish. The traditional Chinese diet, for example, consists primarily of vegetables, fruits, and whole grains. And in Greece, "vegetables and legumes are main meals, not just side dishes," says Antonia Trichopoulou, M.D., Ph.D., professor at the University of Athens Medical School and director of the World Health Organization's Collaborating Center of Nutrition.

Research finds that three servings or more a day of produce can lower the risk of stroke, heart disease, and some cancers. Harvard University's Nurses Health Study, for example, which examined almost 85,000 women over 12 to 14 years, found that those who ate the most fruit and vegetables had a 20 percent lower risk for heart disease. The new USDA guidelines recommend we eat between five and 13 servings of fruit and

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Spice Up Your Plate

vegetables a day, and we're starting to hear the message. The average American consumed roughly 332 pounds of fresh produce in 2004, up from 287 pounds in 1990. Plus, with the growth of America's farmers' markets, the introduction of Consumer Supported Agriculture, where community members buy produce from local farmers each month, and home delivery from many supermarkets, opportunities for Americans to have fresh produce abound.

What you can do:

Try to fill two-thirds of your plate with produce and whole-grain foods, and the remaining third with fish or meat, Montignac says. Also, challenge yourself to put as many colors as possible into your meal. Or go on a fruit exploration: Try one new type of fruit from your local market each week. In summer, freeze some of your new favorites for a frosty after-dinner treat.

Healthy Habit #2 **Savor Leisurely Dining**

Countries known for putting it into practice: Italy, France, Spain, Greece, Japan

A meal in these countries often lasts several hours. In fact, one of Greece's dietary guidelines, its version of our usda dietary guidelines, is to "eat slowly, preferably at regular times of the day, and in a pleasant environment." Sharing a meal is so important that Greeks call someone a friend "by saying we have shared bread together," Trichopoulou says.

For the French, Italians, and Spanish, meals provide quality time with friends and family, a practice that encourages healthful bonds. Eating comfortably and slowly discourages overeating and fosters relaxation, which aids digestion. The body processes food more easily and efficiently when it's calm, Montignac says.

What you can do:

Take time to savor the scent, texture, and flavor of food. A traditional Japanese tea ceremony, for example, includes a role for each of the senses—watching and listening as the tea pours from pot to cup, picking up the cup and feeling the heat, smelling, and finally, tasting. Another way to savor your supper: Divide it into separate courses. Instead of bringing everything to the table at once, have a salad course, then fruit, entrée, and dessert—with, say, at least 10 minutes between each course to digest, chat, and relax. Whether you're dining with a spouse, family, or just you, set the table and sit down, rather than grazing in the kitchen—and enjoy.

Healthy Habit #3 **Practice Portion Control**

Countries known for putting it into practice: France, Japan

We have an abundance of delicious and nutritious food available in America; we just need to pay attention to portions. An average meal in France is 25 percent smaller than one in America, according to a 2003 University of Pennsylvania comparison, which examined portion sizes at 11 similar pairs of establishments, from pizza parlors to ethnic restaurants. The study also found that a typical carton of yogurt sold in Philadelphia was 82 percent larger than one offered in Paris, and a soft drink was 52 percent larger. In Japan, foods also come in smaller sizes and are often eaten out of bowls, rather than large plates or platters.

What you can do:

Japanese from the Okinawa region, who enjoy the longest life span in the world (an average of 82 years), practice "hara hachi bu," which translates to "eight parts out of 10" and means Okinawans stop eating when they are 80 percent full, says Brad Willcox, M.D., M.S., coauthor of the Okinawa Diet Plan. To adopt the concept, set down your fork and remove your plate at the first twinge of fullness, instead of taking a break and eating more. You can also use smaller plates and bowls when setting the table; use a food scale to measure portions; and opt for filling, fiber-rich foods, such as lentils and vegetables. For more tips or to follow the diet online, visit www.okinawadiet.net.

Healthy Habit #4

Eat a Variety of Unprocessed, Fresh Foods

Countries known for putting it into practice: Italy, France, Greece, Japan, the United States

The first thing many foreign visitors comment on when they enter an American supermarket is how many choices are available. It's not uncommon to find wild Alaskan salmon, olive oil from Greece, and grains from Italy all in one store. Organic foods and farmers' markets have also never been more popular. Many of these outlets feature interesting varieties, such as heirloom fruits and vegetables.

Shopping in countries such as France and Italy may also involve several stops—at the butcher, the greengrocer, and the baker—which not only increases the shopper's activity level, but also results in meals made with unprocessed ingredients, Montignac says. Studies show that fresh foods provide more fiber; fewer calories, saturated fats, and trans fats; and less added salt and sugar.

What you can do

Skip the prepared food aisles at the market and choose fresh, whole foods. Also, indulge in salads: With so many prewashed fresh vegetables and fruits available, you can put together a big, colorful one in minutes. Combine bagged baby greens, sliced mushrooms, cherry or sweet grape tomatoes, prechopped fresh bell peppers, and red onions. Drizzle with a bottled, reduced-calorie vinaigrette, and add whole-grain crackers, melba rounds, or matzoh crackers on the side to sneak in whole grains. Also, take vegetables beyond salads and steamers by pairing sauteed broccoli or spinach with whole wheat pasta, and tossing with roasted beets and walnuts.

Healthy Habit #5

Spice Up Your Plate

Countries known for putting it into practice: India, China, Thailand, the United States

Herbs and spices add delicious, attractive, and healthful flair to your plate. In addition to being low in calories and virtually fat free, researchers are discovering that herbs, such as garlic, thyme, and rosemary, and spices, like cinnamon, cloves, and curcumin (also known as turmeric), may fight disease. One recent, 40-day study of 60 people with type 2 diabetes found that eating half a teaspoon of cinnamon twice daily significantly lowered subjects' blood sugar and cholesterol levels.

What you can do:

In the United States, we have many ethnic restaurants and food choices where spices take center stage, and there are still more ways to add them to your diet. For example, to make sure fresh, delicious herbs are available year-round, start a container garden on your windowsill. You can also experiment with using unfamiliar spices on familiar foods. For example, if you love roasting a whole chicken or chicken breasts in paprika, try it with,

say, curry powder. Rub the chicken well with the powder, then roast until juicy and tender. Dip bites of the chicken in bottled chutney mixed with a little lemon or lime juice. Alternatively, add a sprinkle of earthy ground cumin, a touch of ground cinnamon, and a pinch of nutmeg or coriander after rice cooks to add bold flavor and aroma. You can also add fresh herb leaves, such as basil, mint, or tarragon, to salads for a flavor boost.

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