

African American Diet Issues



One of my readers asked that I elaborate on the contrast between the African Americans' diet and the diet of their ancestors from Africa, as well as the health problems many African Americans experience here in the United States.

Some dishes of West African and African American origins have been integrated so well into American culture that they appeal to almost all cultures here. For example, when you eat southern fried chicken, okra, hush puppies and watermelon, you are eating West African and African American foods.

Some of the enslaved African women worked in the plantation house as cooks, nannies, housekeepers and seamstresses. They prepared meals for the plantation owners and their families, and what they carried in their memory from Africa ended up on American tables. Also, their foodstuffs were brought on the cargo ships. West African foods included the Hausa groundnut (relative of the peanut), yams, black-eyed peas, chicken, rice, fresh and dried fish, couscous, millet, greens, okra, grits, sorghum, watermelon, mashed potatoes, polenta, cocoyams, cassava, plantains, peppers and green peas, citrus fruits, and pineapples (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_cuisine).

In *The Africa Cookbook: Tastes of a Continent*, Jessica B. Harris informs us that, "from the south of France to the south of Brooklyn, much of what we eat daily is inspired by the foods of Africa" (Harris, p 47). She educated her readers to the fact that "the rice that turns up on many American tables actually arrived in South Carolina from Madagascar and was cultivated with African know-how" (Harris, p 47).

Rosamund Grant, in her book *Taste of Africa*, says "the essential staples yams, cassava, green bananas and plantains are used throughout Africa" and "sweet potatoes, coconuts, okra, a huge variety of green vegetables, beans and pulses, and nuts and grains, such as corn, are all common cooking ingredients, while all sorts of wonderful tropical fruits, such as mangos,

avocados and papayas are a familiar sight and are eaten at any time of the day—not just for dessert" (Grant, p 7). Grant lists 23 main ingredients from allspice to yams.

Also influenced by West African foods is the "soul food" of African Americans. Common ones include collard greens, mustard greens, fried chicken, fried catfish, chitterlings, peach cobbler, red beans and rice, jambalaya, shrimp Creole, sweet potato pie, candied yams, macaroni and cheese, ham hocks, black-eyed peas, "butter" beans (lima beans), corn bread, hush puppies, spoon bread, buttermilk biscuits, grits, ham and many others.

The enslaved Africans did have small gardens that they were required to keep to grow food for themselves, but they also had to make due for protein and often ate the leftovers (and scraps that would be thrown away) from the plantation house. They used spices, salt and frying to make these scraps or waste from the "big house" taste better. This "American" diet was influenced by European Americans: the scraps were coming from their tables and kitchens. A later influence was the industrialization of agriculture: mass producing foods to feed large quantities of people, instead of having each family grow its own food.

My husband, Eddie Thrash, an African American, wanted to change the medical history of his family. His mother died in Chicago at the age of 33 of an aneurysm (related to high blood pressure) when he was 4. The aunt who raised him and his siblings died of a stroke when he was in his 20s. Ten years before she died, Bannie Mae was diagnosed with diabetes, and was on dialysis. Eddie did try to influence her diet, but she stuck to her cultural traditions and refused.

He realized that if he ate the way they ate, that he would die of the same diet-related diseases that they did (high blood pressure, diabetes, and stroke). Even though Eddie was raised on a farm in rural Georgia, he decided to change from the eating habits of his recent ancestors. Instead of using ham hocks in the collard greens, he started using smoked turkey or chicken breasts. He significantly reduced the use of pork and ham, cut out chitterlings altogether, and started eating less of the processed foods (white flour and

sugar, mashed potatoes, white rice, and packaged foods). He increased the use of fresh fruits and vegetables, which have a higher fiber content and break down slower into blood sugar.

This keeps the blood sugar more normalized than with high glycemic foods such as mashed potatoes, white rice, macaroni and cheese, corn, and peach cobbler, and other foods that include white flour and white sugar. Keeping blood sugar at "normal" levels prevents overworking the pancreas, which is the precursor to diabetes (an overworked pancreas).

As occupational therapists assisting African American clients with meal preparation, we need to be aware of their cultural preferences, but also can recommend ways to adjust their menus for healthier eating. Simple substitutions can cut down the fat and salt normally found in ham hocks, while retaining the flavor. Using fresh fruit instead of processed sweets can reduce the automatic high elevation of blood sugar. Eating vegetables with high fiber content can fill the stomach and reduce the urge to eat lots of bread, or other high glycemic carbohydrates as a reaction to hunger and low blood sugar. Eating brown rice instead of white rice can also cut down the elevation of blood sugar, due to the fiber. Eating fish, chicken, egg whites, and low-fat cheese can provide sufficient protein while limiting salt and "bad fat." Using olive oil instead of lard to fry or sauté food decreases cholesterol. For an excellent resource, see the Barry Sears books on *The Zone*, listed in bibliography.

My husband believes that with some help in patient education from the medical community, including allied health professionals, the ill effects of an unhealthy diet can be undone. ■

Bibliography available at www.advancweb.com/ot or upon request.

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