

# Traditional food systems: Health, culture, sustainability.

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## Introduction

Traditional food systems and cultural food practices are increasingly recognized for their profound impact on human health, environmental sustainability, and societal well-being. This body of research delves into various facets of this complex relationship, highlighting how ancient wisdom and indigenous practices offer contemporary solutions to pressing global issues.

One significant area of focus is the role of traditional food systems in confronting the double burden of malnutrition, which encompasses both undernutrition and overweight/obesity. Scoping reviews demonstrate their potential to provide sustainable, culturally relevant strategies for improving dietary quality and health outcomes, especially for at-risk communities. These approaches often prove more effective than conventional interventions in addressing the full spectrum of malnutrition [1].

The broader cultural context of food is also extensively explored. Anthropological studies reveal how social media platforms powerfully shape current food trends, influencing dietary choices and the spread of health-related information, underscoring the need for culturally informed public health interventions in our digitally interconnected world [2]. Furthermore, the intricate connections between food heritage, individual and collective identity, and overall wellbeing are examined. Food traditions are shown to be crucial for cultural continuity, social cohesion, and psychological comfort, extending beyond mere nutritional intake to promote holistic health and sustainable food systems [4].

Indigenous health benefits are a recurring theme. Reviews consolidate evidence on how traditional indigenous foods can prevent chronic diseases. Returning to diets rich in locally sourced, culturally significant foods improves health outcomes by reducing risk factors for conditions like diabetes and heart disease. This research strongly advocates for policies and programs that bolster traditional food systems, viewing them as pathways to health equity and cultural resilience [3]. This focus extends to children and youth, where greater engagement with traditional food practices correlates with higher intake of nutrient-rich foods and better health outcomes, contrasting with the negative effects of Western diets. Revitalizing these food systems is crucial for fostering intergenerational health

and cultural identity [8].

Ethnobotanical insights further illuminate the significant contribution of traditional food plants to both food security and community health. The deep ecological knowledge embedded in local cultures regarding edible and medicinal plants offers sustainable pathways for dietary diversification and nutrition. Recognizing and integrating this traditional wisdom into modern food systems is advocated to enhance resilience and public well-being [5].

Sustainability is another key aspect. The Mediterranean diet serves as a prime example of a traditional food system that delivers substantial health benefits alongside environmental sustainability. Its emphasis on local, seasonal, and minimally processed foods, combined with its unique cultural practices, contributes to longevity, lower rates of chronic diseases, and supports biodiversity and sustainable agriculture. Its principles are proposed as a global model [6]. However, climate change poses significant threats, particularly to Arctic Indigenous foodways. Research explores how environmental shifts compromise access to nutrient-dense traditional foods, impacting health. This highlights the urgent need for culturally relevant strategies to support food sovereignty and adapt to these environmental changes to safeguard Arctic communities' health and wellbeing [7].

Emerging scientific understanding also links traditional diets to physiological processes. A growing field connects food anthropology with gut microbiota research, suggesting that traditional diets have shaped human gut diversity and health over millennia. Modern dietary shifts away from diverse traditional foods are implicated in dysbiosis and related health issues. This emphasizes an anthropological perspective to understand the complex interplay between diet, microbes, and human health [9].

Finally, the less-explored link between traditional foods and mental health and well-being is systematically reviewed. Evidence indicates that diets rich in culturally resonant traditional foods can foster a sense of belonging, alleviate stress, and supply essential nutrients vital for cognitive function and mood regulation. These findings advocate for the inclusion of traditional food practices into holistic mental health strategies, recognizing their considerable psychosocial and nutritional contributions [10].

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## Conclusion

This collection of research underscores the critical role of traditional food systems and food culture in addressing contemporary health and environmental challenges. Studies reveal how integrating traditional food knowledge can combat the double burden of malnutrition, offering sustainable and culturally appropriate solutions for dietary quality, particularly in vulnerable populations. Traditional indigenous diets are highlighted for their efficacy in preventing chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease, advocating for policies that support these systems for health equity and cultural resilience. The Mediterranean diet stands out as a model for its health benefits and environmental sustainability, emphasizing local, seasonal, and minimally processed foods.

Beyond physical health, the research explores the profound impact of food heritage on identity and wellbeing, contributing to cultural continuity, social cohesion, and psychological comfort. The link between traditional foods and mental health is also systematically reviewed, suggesting that culturally resonant diets can foster belonging, reduce stress, and improve cognitive function. Ethnobotanical insights further demonstrate the contribution of traditional food plants to food security and community health, emphasizing the ecological knowledge embedded in local cultures.

The interplay between food and broader societal aspects is also examined. Social media's influence on food trends and dietary choices is investigated, stressing its role in public health interventions. Climate change's impact on Arctic Indigenous foodways and food security is shown to compromise access to nutrient-dense foods, necessitating culturally relevant adaptation strategies. Lastly, the connection between traditional diets, gut microbiota diversity, and human health suggests modern dietary shifts away from diverse traditional foods contribute to health issues. The revitalization of traditional food systems is consistently presented as vital for promoting

intergenerational health, cultural identity, and sustainable futures.

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