

SUSTAINABLE LIVING GUIDE: 59. THIRTEEN HEALTHY DIET HABITS FROM AROUND THE WORLD¹

Annie Tucker Morgan[©]

When it comes to eating (and many other indulgences), the United States is a culture of excess. To the average American, bigger plus faster equals better; we shovel massive quantities of food and beverages into our mouths on the go, scarcely taking time to taste what we're consuming ... and then we complain about how much weight we're gaining. Meanwhile, diners in other countries favor moderately sized but well-rounded portions, savor their meals in a leisurely fashion with friends and family members, and make exercise part of their daily life. Is it any surprise, then, that so many people in other cultures sustain enviably trim figures without depriving themselves of culinary enjoyment? Let's learn how they do it.

Eat at Home More Often Than You Eat Out (Poland)

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Americans spend an average of 37 percent of their food budget on eating out, compared with only 5 percent among Poles. No wonder U.S. obesity rates are so high: restaurants here are notorious for serving oversize, calorie- and fat-laden portions. By eating our meals at home, we not only have much more control over the ingredients we put in our mouths, but we also save money and get to spend quality time with our families. It's a win-win.

Go Nuts for Nuts (Africa)

Packed with protein and often healthy fats, nuts can serve as a nutritious and filling replacement for meat and poultry. In Africa, particularly in Gambia, peanuts are a common complement to vegetables and spices in numerous soups and stews—and perhaps it's no coincidence that this nation has not only no problems with obesity, but also one of the lowest international incidences of all types of cancer.

Make Friends with Rice and Beans (Brazil)

Americans tend to think of starchy foods as the enemy, but according to a study published in the journal *Obesity Research*, a diet focused on rice and beans (in contrast with a typical Western diet), such as the kind Brazilians espouse, reduces people's risk of becoming overweight by approximately 14 percent. Low in fat and high in fiber, it's a winning combination that stabilizes blood sugar and leaves people feeling satisfied.

Spice Things Up (Thailand and Malaysia)

The hot peppers in Thai cuisine, which is legendary for its spiciness, accomplish a dual dietary purpose: they both speed metabolism and slow the eating process. For Americans, weight gain is

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an inevitable side effect of our tendency to wolf down our meals; our brains don't have time to process our bodies' signals that we're full until we've already overeaten. So when spicy fare forces us to slow our pace (because we simply can't eat three-alarm red curry as quickly as we can put away, say, McDonald's french fries), our waistlines benefit. In Malaysia, turmeric, a spice that conveniently grows wild in the jungle, contains a substance called curcumin, which, according to a Tufts University study, may suppress fat-tissue growth and increase our bodies' fat-burning capacity.

Don't Skip Breakfast (Germany)

It may seem counterintuitive that consuming more calories can encourage weight loss, but eating a healthful, well-balanced breakfast—such as a hard-boiled egg, whole-grain toast, and fruit—jump-starts our metabolism and satisfies our brains' reward centers, making us less likely to succumb to the desire to indulge in high-calorie food later in the day.

Stretch Your Legs and Arms (India and the Netherlands)

In the United States, we're apt to hop in our cars at the slightest provocation, even if the grocery store is only a few blocks away. By contrast, in the two-wheeled Netherlands, there are even more bicycles than people, and 54 percent of Dutch cyclists use them for daily activities. Take a page out of their book and pedal your way to a slim physique; an average-size adult pedaling at a moderate pace can burn around 550 calories per hour.

In India, yoga devotees hit the floor to burn calories, gain strength, and expand their minds. While people all over the United States are following suit, they often focus primarily on yoga's potential to reduce stress, when in fact it can also be a powerful weight-loss tool: the combination of practicing on an empty stomach and building muscle boosts metabolism, which means more pounds shed even after practitioners leave the mat.

Put Meat on the Back Burner (Greece and Asia)

In contrast with the steak-and-potatoes fare that characterizes the U.S. diet, the dominant paradigm in Mediterranean countries, such as Greece, is less meat-intensive. Heart-healthy olive oil; vegetables like artichokes, spinach, eggplant, onions, and tomatoes; and proteins such as chickpeas and nuts form the building blocks of daily meals, whereas meat is treated as a supplementary item, not the main event—stuffed inside grape leaves with rice to make dolmas, for example. Similarly, in Asian countries, meat is viewed as a garnish, rather than as the focal point of a meal; Asian diners get their protein from fish and soy, and load up on vegetables, rice, noodles, and soup to satisfy their hunger.

Drink Rooibos Tea (South Africa)

Naturally sweet and even more full-flavored than green tea, rooibos may prevent overeating by keeping drinkers well hydrated (what people often perceive as hunger pangs are actually just signs of dehydration) and contains catechins, antioxidant compounds found to help promote exercise-induced abdominal fat loss. Many tea-drinking cultures are known to have lower rates of obesity than the United States, but we're finally catching on—rooibos tea is now available at our great beverage bastion Starbucks.

Munch on Pickled Veggies (Hungary)

Pickled produce isn't just flavorful, appealingly crunchy, and filling; it's also slimming. Why? The main ingredient in pickling liquid is vinegar, and the main ingredient in vinegar is acetic acid, which offers numerous health benefits, chief among them blood-pressure and blood-sugar reduction and prevention of fat formation. By snacking on not only traditional pickled cucumber, but also the pickled vegetables Hungarians enjoy—such as cabbage, tomatoes, and bell peppers—you'll reap these benefits. And if you get sick of asking for a side of extra dills with your deli sandwich, try drizzling a little extra balsamic vinegar on your salad.

Make Lunch, Not Dinner, the Biggest Meal of the Day (Europe and Mexico)

Americans tend to skip breakfast, eat a light lunch, and save all their serious eating for the nighttime hours. But having a big meal shortly before bedtime doesn't do our metabolism any favors; on the contrary, any extra calories we ingest at that hour get stored as fat. Rather than consuming the bulk of your calories in the evening, start the day with a light, sensible breakfast and treat yourself to a hearty lunch, followed by a light dinner, as people do in most Latin and European countries. That way, you'll maximize your body's fat-burning potential and wake up hungry, ready to supercharge your system with a morning meal.

Eat Slowly and Enjoy Yourself (France)

A mere 28 percent of American families eat together each night, compared with 92 percent of French families. Taking time to relish one another's company over a nutritious, drawn-out meal is good for both the soul and the body: not only will you bond with your loved ones, but you'll also experience fullness earlier and therefore consume fewer calories. Make dinnertime a family affair to look forward to—not just something you squeeze in between work and TV time—and you'll see the results reflected in your scale.

Incorporate More Fish into Your Diet (Japan and the Netherlands)

The Japanese eat more fish than any other country, but people in the Netherlands are no strangers to seafood, either—in fact, the Dutch consume an average of eighty-five million raw herring per year. Fish contains high concentrations of omega-3 fatty acids that enhance brain function, improve cardiovascular health, and reduce levels of the stress hormone cortisol, which has been proven to increase abdominal fat deposits. And because most seafood is low-fat and low-calorie, you can fill up on it without packing on pounds.

Stop Eating Before You're Full (Japan)

The Okinawans have perfected a calorie-control system that they call *hara hachi bu*: it means eating until you're only 80 percent full. The logic behind this tactic is that habitually eating until you're extremely full will cause your stomach to stretch and therefore require greater quantities of food to achieve satisfaction. By learning to leave the table at the moment when the first inklings of fullness creep in, you'll keep your total daily caloric consumption to a minimum. Suspicious? The Okinawans are reaping the rewards of this practice: their average body mass index is only 21.5, as opposed to American adults' 28.

Bon Appétit!

Losing weight and maintaining a trim physique don't necessitate all of the extreme lengths to which Americans go; you don't have to starve yourself, skip meals, drink only lemon- and cayenne-spiked water for ten days, or spend six hours each day at the gym to slim down. What you do need to do is become a more balanced, more conscious observer of your own intake—someone who knows that it's actually a good thing to indulge in a piece of rich dark chocolate or a glass of robust red wine, but who simultaneously doesn't overindulge by following those items with an entire sleeve of cookies or three more drinks. By striving to emulate the sound culinary practices of these other countries, where people enjoy eating to the fullest but not till they're uncomfortably full, we stand to gain only knowledge and good health—not weight.