Dear Alice,

A lot of people talk about regional diets that are really healthy. I hear a lot about the Mediterranean diet, traditional Japanese diets, etc. Is adopting the diet of another region a good way to improve health, or is it just a fad? Will eating like the Japanese give me the same health benefits that Japanese people seem to have?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Delicious and nutritious foods can be found all over the world! Adopting a diet similar to that of another region could positively impact your health and add some variety to what you eat. Ultimately, it's important to pick a diet that's right for you and for your lifestyle.

Studying regional diets can (and should!) certainly impact what we decide to put on our plates. Some of the healthiest diets around the world tend to feature lots of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fewer servings of dairy, red meat, and poultry. They also limit unhealthy fats and instead include healthier ones. You might want to consider what types of foods you have available because not everything that is available in another country will be readily available where you are.

You specifically mentioned the Mediterranean and Japanese diets. The staples of the Mediterranean diet - which have been associated with a lowered risk of heart disease, cancer, Parkinson's disease, and Alzheimer's disease - are fruits, veggies, legumes, and nuts. Cooks also use olive oil instead of butter, limit the use of red meat, and incorporate fish several times a week. The Japanese diet has been linked to long lifespans and lowered risk of heart disease, but also hypertension (high blood pressure). Foods commonly found in the Japanese diet include eating a lot of omega-3-rich fish and protein-dense soy, drinking green tea, and limiting intake of sugar and white flour. Finding fresh olive oil or fresh fish might not be as easy, or inexpensive, for you as it is for someone living on the Mediterranean coast or in Tokyo, but you do not need to eat these all the time. Fresh fruits, veggies, beans and nuts might be easier to come by depending on where you live.

Overall, the ideal diet for you depends on a lot of things, such as your genetic makeup, hormonal profile, culture, and food preferences. The USDA Ethnic/Cultural Food Pyramids display recommendations for healthy eating from many different countries. Reviewing these may help you find food choices that work for you. Foods that are easily accessible and your
level of physical activity are also factors to consider when choosing what to eat. Talking to a health professional may also be helpful!

Here’s to eating well wherever you are!

Alice!
Category:
Nutrition & Physical Activity [3]
Food Choices & Health [4]
Optimal Nutrition [5]

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Resources

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