

I. Health and Nutrition: An Overview

A. Goal of a Healthy Life From Start to Finish

1. A Healthy Diet

a. Okinawan Diet

The Okinawan Diet

What is the Okinawan Diet?

The Okinawan Diet describes the pattern of food consumption and lifestyle of the people of the Japanese island of Okinawa, a population well known for its extraordinary health and longevity[1]. They have the longest disability-free life expectancy and the highest percentage of centenarians in the world.

The Okinawan Diet is similar to the Mediterranean Diet, though lower in calories. It is heavily based on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fish, with small amounts of poultry and lean meat. Alcohol intake is generally low to moderate (if at all). Okinawans exercise frequently and almost never smoke. Heart disease rates are 80% lower than in the United States. Breast and prostate cancer are unheard of in older Okinawans keeping to a traditional lifestyle. Obesity is equally rare.

How to lead an Okinawan lifestyle for long-term health

- Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables, especially dark green leafy vegetables, sweet potatoes.
- Eat only whole grains. Avoid refined grains.
- Eat fish 2-3 times per week.
- Exercise.
- Don't smoke.

Comparing Diets

In short, the Okinawan diet contains a much greater abundance of complex carbohydrates and plant-based foods, and it is much lower in fat than the Standard American Diet. The Okinawan Diet differs from the Mediterranean Diet in its lack of non-fat dairy products.

The average Okinawan consumes at least seven servings of vegetables, and an equal number of whole grains (noodles, bread, and rice), daily. Two to four servings of fruit, along with soy beans, green tea, and seaweed, round out the diet. Omega-3-rich fish is eaten about three times per week. The diet emphasizes dark green, calcium-rich vegetables. Meat, poultry, and eggs account for only 3% of the diet.

Okinawa is one of the Ryukyu islands south of Japan. In 1945 it was the site of one of World War II's bloodiest battles as U.S. forces pushed toward the Japanese mainland. Though the island was returned to Japan in the early 1970s, the U.S. still maintains large military bases there.

However, older Okinawans still maintain their traditional culture unaffected by the American presence.

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Health Benefits

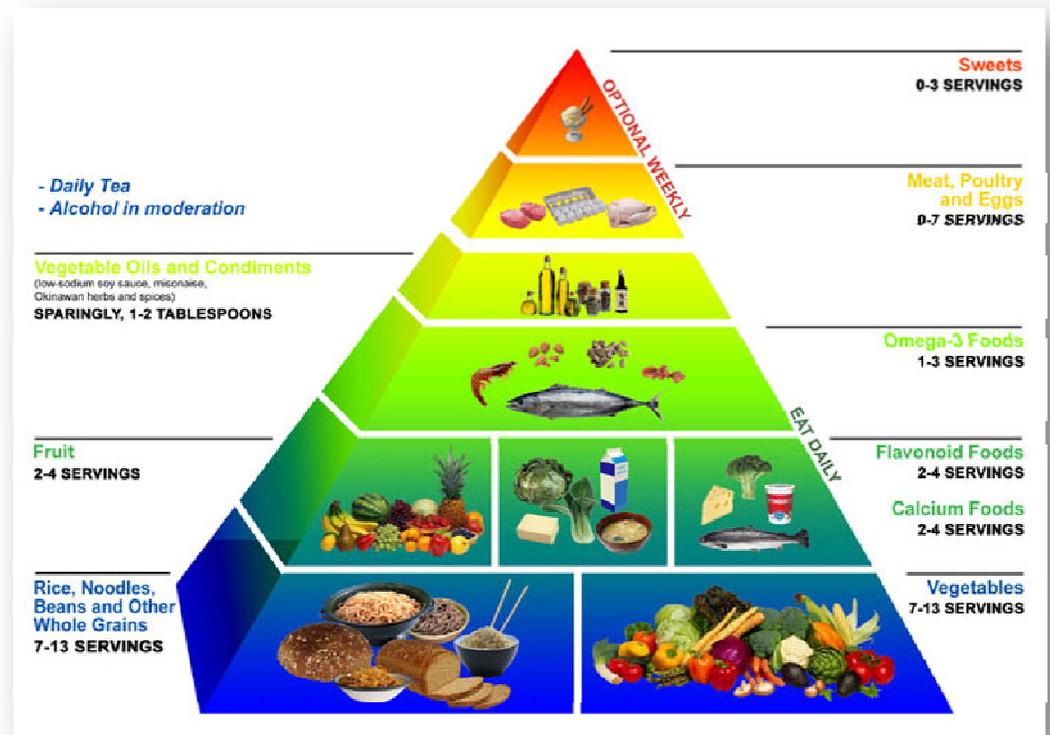
It is thought that the amazing health and longevity of Okinawans is tied to the low caloric content and high nutrient density of the foods they eat[1]. Long-term caloric restriction (eating fewer calories without malnutrition) is well known to extend life span and improve health risks for many animal species[2, 3]. The low calorie diet and low body weight of Okinawans may explain their long life expectancy and the high prevalence of centenarians in the population[1]. It doesn't hurt that Okinawans are also physically active with martial arts, dancing, gardening, and walking. Even the centenarians are strong, lean, and healthy.

Over the long term, a diet that incorporates the foods and beverages found in the Okinawan diet could potentially have a major impact on preventing cardiovascular disease and other chronic illnesses[4], which are virtually non-existent in Okinawans.

References

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2. Weindruch, R. Caloric restriction and aging. *Sci Am*, 1996. **274**(1): p. 46-52.
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4. O'Keefe, JH, Gheewala, NM, and O'Keefe, JO. Dietary strategies for improving post-prandial glucose, lipids, inflammation, and cardiovascular health. *J Am Coll Cardiol*, 2008. **51**(3): p. 249-55.

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The Okinawa-Diet food guide pyramid emphasizes eating healthy fat, calcium, flavonoid and omega-3 rich foods. Whole grains and other "Right Carbs" along with vegetables make up the base of the pyramid. Use the Okinawa-Diet food pyramid to guide you in making healthy and nutritious food choices.