

Dry Beans Play Major Role in Traditional, Healthy Hispanic Diet

By Judith Rodriguez, PhD, RDN and Doreen Bevans

Hispanics in the United States consume a proportionately larger amount of beans (33% more) than the general population.¹ Beans are a major source of protein, fiber, iron, manganese, and magnesium in the traditional Hispanic diet. Research indicates that consumers of dry beans, peas, and lentils had higher intakes of nutrients and lower glycemic indices than non-consumers.^{2,3} However, as with other immigrant groups, as acculturation occurs, the diet changes include increased intake of meats and decreased intake of beans.

Hispanic Diet and Food Patterns

Dietary patterns differ across the Hispanic groups, but there are some similarities. All groups' traditional diets are a combination of indigenous foods, influences from Spain and other cultural groups that settled in the region. This includes maize, potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, chocolate from the Americas, wheat, rice, sugar, bananas, plantains, olives, coffee, and oranges from the Old World.⁴ Caribbean Hispanics had a strong influence from Africa and Europe, while western areas of South America had an Asian influence. Argentina had a strong Italian influence; Brazil had German and Chinese influence.

Meat and Beans

Latinos consume beef, pork, and fish, as well as different legumes. Black, kidney, navy, and pinto beans are popular as are chick peas, pink beans, lima beans, lentils, and pigeon peas. Various dry beans are used in stews and other dishes. Beans provide low cost protein, fiber, and magnesium which may partially account for why the nutrient is not identified as a short-

fall nutrient among Hispanics although it is for the non-Hispanic black population.^{8,9} Increased acculturation is associated with decreased rice and bean consumption.

Dairy

Whole milk is generally consumed, and despite some resistance to lower fat milks, there is increasing acceptance with acculturation.^{5,6} Cheeses are popular, especially among Mexican Americans. This includes Queso Blanco (a white cheese). In the United States, yogurt has been increasing in popularity, especially among younger Hispanics.⁷ Cheese may be consumed as a snack with coffee or hot chocolate, or shredded and served over mashed beans or other dishes. Dietitians should recommend that cheeses be made from pasteurized milk.

Fruits and Vegetables

Savory vegetables, such as onions, peppers, and garlic are chopped and added to foods or sautéed and used as a seasoning base with or without tomatoes or tomato sauce. Ingredients such as cilantro, long-leaf coriander, cumin, bay leaves, olives, and a variety of peppers add to the flavor base. Starchy vegetables such as tanager, taro, yam, sweet potatoes, ripe or green plantains, and green bananas are boiled and included with



Terminology Tip

Hispanic refers to people from countries that were colonies of Spain, or Hispaniola. So a general reference to such would exclude countries such as Brazil in South America, which was a colony of Portugal. For some, *Latino* is a reference to the Latin empire and, as such, would include Brazil. For others, *Latino* is based on the term Latin America, which generally is a reference to the Americas. *Hispanic* and *Latino* are used interchangeably throughout this article.

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meals or in thick stews or soups. Both tropical and temperate weather fruits are popular and are eaten fresh, canned, or in fruit-based beverages. However, sweetened carbonated and fruit flavored drinks are replacing juices.

Grains

Corn or wheat tortillas and buns are most commonly consumed by Mexican and Central Americans and rice is more common for Cubans and Puerto Ricans.^{10,11} However, the popularity of Mexican tortillas and tacos among mainstream Americans has also extended to other Latino groups.

Cultural Variations in Meals and Dishes

Common Mexican and Central American dishes include refried beans with tortillas. For Puerto Ricans, the traditional dish is white rice and red kidney beans, while for Cubans the traditional dish is white rice and black beans. Although some Mexican cuisine is associated with “being hot,” Puerto Rican and Cuban cuisine are better described as savory, spicy, or highly seasoned. In the United States, due to the increased exposure and popularity of ethnic cuisines, each cultural group consumes foods from other groups.

Health of Hispanics

U.S. Department of Health data indicate that Latinos have among the highest rates of obesity in the country, and are uninsured at a rate higher than any other group in America.

Major causes of death among Hispanics include cancer, heart disease, unintentional injuries (accidents), stroke, chronic liver disease, chronic lower respiratory diseases, influenza and pneumonia, and nephritis.¹³ In addition to health disparities between non-Hispanic whites and Hispanics, it is important to compare Hispanic subgroups. For example, although the prevalence of low birth rates for Hispanics is lower than the non-Hispanic white population, it is higher for Puerto Ricans, as are infant mortality, asthma, and HIV/AIDS. In addition, Mexican Americans have higher prevalence levels of diabetes.¹³

Obesity Rates A Concern

Latinos’ higher rates of overweight and obesity than the non-Hispanic white population is a major concern. Latinos are 1.2 times more likely to be obese than non-Hispanic whites. Mexican American women have among the highest prevalence of overweight or obesity—78% versus 60% of non-Hispanic white women. Similarly, Mexican American children are 1.6 times more likely to be overweight than non-Hispanic white children. Mexican American boys are at particularly high risk for overweight and obesity (19% obese versus 15% for non-Hispanic whites).¹⁴ However, the HHANES data indicated a variation in levels of overweight among the various Hispanic groups.¹⁵

Areas of the Diet That Need Improvement

Identifying total caloric and fat intake are important elements of nutrition assessment. One suggestion is to determine if, and how much, added fat is used in the bean dishes and to provide alternatives. For example:

- If lard is added, RDNs could recommend olive or canola oil.
- If large amounts of fat or oil are used, RDNs could recommend decreasing the amount and using a small amount of extra virgin olive oil for more flavor with less fat.
- If oil or fat are used to “refry” mashed beans, RDNs could recommend using small amounts of water or broth instead.
- If salt pork, bacon, sausages, chorizo, or fatty meats are added, RDNs could recommend adding cubes of lean ham, lean pork, turkey, or lower fat sausage (e.g. chicken sausage instead of pork) in small amounts.

Counseling Tips

Determine the socio-demographics, cultural ancestry, and level of acculturation of the individual. Highlight the cultural role of beans, their potential cost savings, their nutrient contributions, their role in prevention of common chronic diseases, and the assistance they may provide with

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weight regulation.¹⁶ Provide tips, such as draining and rinsing canned beans (to reduce sodium by up to 35%), and discuss ways to easily integrate them into the diet. Explain how adding or increasing beans improves the nutritional quality of traditional and contemporary recipes. Highlight the cost effectiveness of consuming beans as a protein food. Help the client establish goals that are based on preferences, values, and level of acculturation. Be sure these are small action steps. Use a counseling technique that promotes behavior change and empowerment, such as the “Teach back” method.¹⁷ For example, after providing nutrition education/information ask the client to tell you:

- What he or she will do to increase bean intake;
- Why it is important to do so;
- How he or she will do it in an easy adaptable way.

Five Key Takeaways

For Latinos, beans are important culturally, nutritionally, and economically. Some suggestions are to:

- Add tomato sauce or diced tomatoes, potatoes, carrots, or sweet potatoes to stewed beans.
- Add more beans than meat in chili dishes and traditional starchy soups or stews, such as *sancochos*.
- Serve more beans than rice in meals.
- Omit the meat, or serve a smaller portion, for cost savings and a healthier meal in a rice, beans, and meat meal.
- Serve more white beans, which are higher in iron, especially to persons at risk for iron deficiency.²

Latinos in the U.S. are culturally persistent and a heterogeneous group that bring and hold on to traditions, but also adopt—and influence—U.S. cuisine. The HHANES study concluded that “Separate estimates of dietary intakes should be made for each Hispanic group” because grouping may mask important differences.¹¹ However, the role of dry beans as an important healthy traditional food and major contributor

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Dry Beans Commonly Consumed (by nationality)

Country	Commonly consumed bean(s)	Comments
Argentina	Fava or red kidney beans*	Beans may be used in salads.
Belize	Red kidney beans**	Stewed beans may be made with coconut milk and served with either rice or tortillas.
Bolivia	Black beans*	Refer to them as <i>porotos</i> and make black bean chili.
Brazil	Black beans**	Feijoada, a national dish, has black beans and many types of meats and/or sausages.
Chile	A local cranberry bean, navy beans*	Porotos is a dish made with cranberry beans.
Colombia	Red kidney beans	Refer to them as <i>frijoles</i> .
Costa Rica	Black beans	Black beans and rice, fried together are called <i>gallo pinto</i> .
Cuba	Black beans, chick peas	Black beans and white rice are called <i>Moros y Cristianos</i> , from Moors and Christians.
Dominican Republic	Red kidney beans	Habichuelas con dulce are beans made as a dessert with raisins, cinnamon, coconut milk, etc.
Ecuador	Many types, including black or kidney	Refer to them as <i>porotos</i> .
El Salvador	Black or red kidney beans	A thick corn tortilla (pupusa) may be stuffed with black beans.
Guatemala	Black beans	Refried black beans are <i>frijoles volteados</i> .
Honduras	Many types	Have red kidney beans and rice.
Mexico	Pinto, black, red kidney, chick peas	Beans are used in many dishes, intact or refried (boiled, mashed), with rice, tortillas, in stews, soups, mixed dishes or casseroles.
Nicaragua	Kidney beans	Red beans and rice, fried together are called <i>gallo pinto</i> .
Panama	Pigeon peas	Soupy rice with beans, meats and starchy vegetables is called <i>gallo pinto</i> . Pigeon peas are called <i>gandules</i> .
Paraguay	Pinto beans, black, chick peas	Pinto beans for bean soup, also black and chick pea.*
Peru	Peruvian (mayocoba or Canary) beans, black beans	Peruvian beans are similar to pintos.
Puerto Rico	Red kidney beans, pigeon peas, chick peas, navy beans, pink beans	Refer to red kidney beans as <i>habichuelas</i> and black beans as <i>frijoles</i> . A <i>matrimonio</i> (a marriage) is a mix of rice and beans. Pigeon peas are called <i>gandules</i> .
Uruguay	Fava, red kidney, pinto beans	Beans may be used in salads.
Venezuela	Black, kidney or fava	The black beans are called <i>carotas negras</i> and the soup is called <i>sopa de frijoles negros</i> .
Spain	Chick peas (garbanzo beans), navy beans	Fabada is also known as Asturian (white bean) soup; Potaje de garbanzo is Spanish chick pea soup.

*Many types of beans are eaten but generally not consumed as commonly as in Central America or other South American countries.

**Although Brazil, located in South America, was originally a colony of Portugal and is Portuguese (not Spanish) speaking, it is included in the table due to its high black bean consumption. Likewise, Belize, located in Central America was a British colony but has a large population of people of indigenous and Spanish ancestry, as well as predominantly Spanish speakers who have a large consumption of red beans.



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of nutrients to the diet should be encouraged through the continued and increased consumption of a variety of beans.

Understanding the socio-demographic factors of the local population served is critical for culturally appropriate and culturally sensitive nutrition education and program delivery. 🌿

Author's Note: *The terms Hispanic and Latino are used to refer to many groups in the United States. The terms generally refer to people in the U.S. with an ancestral heritage of Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Spain, Uruguay, and Venezuela. The terms are used interchangeably throughout this article.*¹²

About the Authors

Dr. Judith Rodriguez, PhD, RDN, is chair of the Department of Nutrition and Dietetics at the University of North Florida. Over the past thirty years, Dr. Rodriguez has been involved in a variety of professional activities. She was named the 2013 UNF Distinguished Professor and is past president of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

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Hispanics in the U.S.

Hispanics make up about 17% of the U.S. population (52 million people). Of this number, 63% are Mexican Americans, 9% are Puerto Ricans, 4% are Cubans, and the remainder is comprised of all other Hispanic nationalities. The majority of Hispanics reside in the southwest (Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas), the southeast (Florida and Georgia), northeast (New York and New Jersey), and Illinois.¹² Recent migration patterns indicate movement by Hispanics to non-traditional areas, like Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Tennessee.¹⁸

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