



Eating Healthy in Native Communities

Some of the world's healthiest foods were introduced by Native people. Native food provides a variety of nutritious and healthful choices like pumpkins (rich with beta-carotene), beans (providing complex carbohydrates and healthy fiber) and berries (filled with anti-oxidants). We know that our traditional foods are healthy and give us all the nutrients we need to live long, happy and purposeful lives.

We also know that Native communities face some significant challenges to getting healthy and nutritious food on the table for their families. Consider this:

- ◆ Almost all American Indian reservations are classified as food deserts or areas lacking fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthful whole foods, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.
- ◆ Almost 25 percent of Native households are food insecure or they have limited or uncertain access to adequate food, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Despite these and many other challenges, there is an important movement underway in Indian Country to promote and share our traditional ways of growing, gathering and preparing foods to develop our own solutions to the serious health problems in Native communities.

Health benefits of traditional foods

The “Three Sisters” is the gold standard of solid nutrition and is a staple for many tribes historically and for Native people today. The Three Sisters are squash, corn and climbing beans (typically tepary beans or common beans). They are great sources of vitamins, phytochemicals (antioxidants) and fiber. In addition, the Three Sisters complement each other.

Consider this:¹

- ◆ Corn contains vitamins C and K, phytochemicals (antioxidants), B vitamins, and fiber. It may also reduce the risk of cancer. According to Registered Dietician and American Dietetic Association spokesperson, David Grotto, corn was shown in one study to offer a 27% reduction in lung cancer risk.
- ◆ Pumpkin is packed with potassium and fiber. Just one cup has more than 300% of the recommended daily allowance of vitamin A. It's also rich in the antioxidant beta-carotene, which may help slow aging and reduce problems related to type 2 diabetes, according to the American Dietetic Association.
- ◆ Beans are rich in fiber and are good sources of potassium, B vitamins and folic acid. They are also a great low-fat source of cholesterol-free protein.



¹ WebMD. Retrieved October 2013 from, www.webmd.com/food-recipes/features/5-super-healthy-native-american-foods.



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Our ancestors knew the value of traditional foods for optimal health. Nutritionists and dieticians are sharing the health benefits of Native foods with the general population. Why? Because it's traditional and it works to improve health outcomes.

Moving forward

In addition to growing your own traditional foods and incorporating them into your family's diet, here are some additional ideas to ensure that our children and grandchildren are healthy and carry on the traditions and cultural practices of our communities.

- ◆ Teach your child or a young person to create a traditional dish or meal to serve to your family or bring to community event;
- ◆ Advocate for new or support your current tribal farmers' market;
- ◆ Consider asking local vendors who cater community events to serve traditional healthy menus;
- ◆ Advocate for new or be active in tribal community gardens;
- ◆ Talk to community members and tribal officials about developing polices that will provide incentives to local stores and vending businesses for adding healthy nutritional options;
- ◆ Talk to schools, senior centers and community program representatives to promote programs and policies that require more healthy snacks and traditional foods; and
- ◆ If possible, grow a garden of your own.

For more information, visit:

- ◆ American Indian Health-Recipes <http://americanindianhealth.nlm.nih.gov/eating.html>
- ◆ iGrow South Dakota State University <http://igrow.org/community-development/local-foods/native-american-gardens/>
- ◆ Tribal Connections www.tribalconnections.org/health_news/native_roots/april2004p3.html
- ◆ Traditional Native Recipes www.aihd.ku.edu/recipes/
- ◆ The Chickasaw Nation in partnership with the USDA has designed a program titled *Get Fresh!* With lists of recipes that can be viewed online. <http://getfreshcooking.com/>
- ◆ A list of recipes from *Indian Country Today* utilizing traditional native foods. <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/department/native-recipes>.
- ◆ For a list of healthy traditional recipes from the American Indian Health and Diet Project. www.aihd.ku.edu/recipes/index.html.
- ◆ Intertribal Bison Cooperative Recipes <http://itbcbuffalo.com/view/recipes>

