

African American Culture and Foods

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Stereotyping

This is very basic level information about the culture described. It is meant to offer staff an opportunity to learn in general terms; it cannot account for the diversity within each individual society or culture and is not meant, in any way, to infer to all people.

Background

Throughout the 1500s to the 1800s, the African Diaspora resulted in dispersion of millions of Africans during the Transatlantic Slave Trades to different regions throughout America and the Caribbean. Since then, African Americans, also known as Black or American Black people, have been born, and raised in America for generations. The term African American itself is deceiving; it refers to a multiethnic and cultural group of black people with historical ties to Africa, Europe, and Spain, as well as the original people of America. Some Black immigrants or their children may identify as African American, however, the majority of first-generation immigrants prefer to identify with their nation of origin.

African Americans, those that were free and those enslaved, have played a major part in the development of America; in fact, in many ways, slavery has underpinned the American economy. African Americans fought in wars, developed businesses, created medical and technological advances, rallied for their political, educational, and financial rights, while many policies limited their access to the very basic human rights others were afforded and benefited from.

African Americans as a people have continuously been discriminated against, systematically ignored, denied, and dehumanized, providing a false notion of being second class citizens in America. Needless to say, historical trauma is a big part of the African American history.

Acceptable Terminology:

Black/African American: terms typically referring to ethnic groups consisting of Americans with partial or full ancestry from any of the racial groups of Africa.

People of Color: a term that refers to addressing or referring to multiple ethnic groups.

Health Disparities

In the United States, African Americans experience a higher rate of health and health care disparities in comparison to their White, Hispanic, and Asian Americans counterparts. These disparities include lower health status, inferior quality of care, higher unmet need for care, more food insecurity, an increased likelihood to seek care from a hospital emergency room, and fewer safe and supportive neighborhoods.

Especially concerning, maternal and infant mortality rates are 2-3 times higher amongst African Americans. Studies have found that Black mothers have higher rates of pregnancy induced hypertension (PIH), low birth weight (LBW), preterm delivery, C-section, and other pregnancy and postpartum complications. This chronic stress resulting in high cortisol levels and other physiologic responses over time takes a toll on overall health of the body.

One primary concern echoed by Black participants is their relationship with healthcare providers. Concerns include:

- Feelings of distrust, resentment, fear, judgement, mistreatment from healthcare providers.
- During pregnancy, women may often feel unsupported and unheard, especially if they are experiencing racism during clinic and hospital visits.
- Low utilization of childbirth classes; citing cost, location, feeling it's unneeded, conflicts with work/school schedule, or lack of diversity in classes.
- Lack of supportive care and higher rates of postpartum depression (PPD) (4 times more likely than non-black mothers).

Traditions, Customs, & Taboos

Family reunions are an important ritual that have long contributed to the survival, health, and endurance of African American families. They help to maintain cultural heritage throughout many turbulent times. Although it may appear different in the way it's done across the population, some key elements remain consistent, like the importance of elders as historians, the importance of food, but more importantly the recipes used to make the food that have been passed down for generations, and the importance of music that tells a story and helps to bridge the generational gaps. Religion is also another important facet of African American tradition, offering hope, support, and connection, bringing families together which builds a sense of strength and structure. Historically, Christian churches were used as meeting places to discuss escape during slavery, civil rights, and freedom. In recent years, they have been a place to discuss religious values as well as the diverse needs of the community. Many times, members of the congregation call each other "church family".

Some practices surrounding common beliefs comes from information or shared advice that has also been passed down the generations. Seeking advice of older family members as a respected source is common. Many African American mothers seek trusted information from family and friends who have had babies themselves. This may also be their primary support system during the pregnancy, along with the father of the baby. Reliance of family, friends, partners, church, or the general community is common and widely more trusted over that of government programs.

Culture & Foods

Understanding the importance of food in one's culture is essential to WIC nutrition education. For African Americans, "soul food" is considered to be an important part of their cultural diet, but there are many more traditional foods. Soul food is said to be born out of necessity and is

very much a part of the African American culture. During slavery, slaves were given the smallest of rations of food each week and families had to learn to make dishes, most often fried, with the scraps they had available to them. In the centuries to follow, food availability, economic factors, literacy, and health, combined with their history and heritage continued to shape the African American diet. Today, the overall diet is as varied as the those who are eating it.

Traditional vs Westernized Diet

- **African Heritage Diet:** Many of the common dishes eaten are rich in nutrients including collard greens, turnip greens, and other leafy greens, yellow vegetables, okra, legumes, beans, grits (a type of porridge made from boiled cornmeal), chitlins (cooked animal intestines, usually pork or cow), rice, and potatoes. Fresh fruits and vegetables, poultry and seafoods are also common but cost can be a factor in intake.
- **Westernized Diet:** Southern “soul food” includes meats, fats, and sugar. Fried chicken or fish, barbeque ribs, baked macaroni & cheese, corn bread, sweet potato pie, sugary drinks, and sweet tea. Common ways to prepare foods include frying, barbecuing, baking, and serving foods with gravy or sauce.

Breastfeeding

Though many choose to breastfeed their babies, the Black community has historically faced disparities in their breastfeeding rates. Understanding the history behind these disparities, educating on breastfeeding success, and offering supportive services will go a long way in offering culturally appropriate care that empowers Black parents to make an informed choice about infant feeding and allow them to feel supported along the way.

Formula Feeding

Formula use for many cultures has been associated with a sign of wealth. There have also been misunderstandings surrounding the difference between breastmilk and formula. For some families, formula is seen as a necessity especially when they have to return to work quickly after giving birth. It may also be the message participants received about what is best for baby from family, friends, healthcare, and advertising that normalizes formula use.

Starting Solids

For some families, there may be pressure to start solids early. Some families choose to mix infant cereal with the formula to offer in the bottle often times when the infant is just a few months old. This may be from the assumption that baby is crying because they are hungry, baby needs to sleep more, or it may simply come from the advice of others. Educating parents on understanding baby cues may help to decrease early introduction to solids.

Parenting

The way a child is raised has an impact on the way they see the world. In the African American community, children are raised to respect their elders and to be polite in public. This is especially true for older black parents and grandparents raising their grandchildren. You may hear a participant say, “Yes, ma’am”; this is an affirmation of respect. Teachings of respectable behavior seems to come from a perspective that black children should be seen as a non-threatening part of the general society but also comes from past fears and the desire to keep Black children safe.

Holidays & Celebrations

African Americans celebrate to some degree all US holidays, but not all have the same value or meaning. Holidays that are **culturally relevant** include Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Memorial Day ([African American Contributions to Memorial Day](#)). Specialized holidays African Americans may celebrate are Black History month (February), and Black Breastfeeding week (4th week in August), Kwanzaa (December 26- January 1), Black Love Day (February 13), Indigenous People Day (October 10), and Juneteenth (June 19), the oldest nationally celebrated holiday commemorating the ending of slavery in the United States.

Thank you for taking the time to learn about African American culture and ways that you may offer support and encouragement to all our WIC families.

Resources

**Some of this material was adapted from the IOWA WIC program cultural toolkit.*

[Ethnic Cuisine- A Bridge to Health Equity](#) (Today’s Dietitian, February 2012)

[African Heritage Diet](#) (Oldways)

[Heritage Diets and Culturally Appropriate Dietary Advice May Help Combat Chronic Diseases](#) (JAMA, November 2019)

[Cultural Diversity: eating in America, African-American](#) (Ohio State University, 2010)

[African American Women’s Preparation for Childbirth From the Perspective of African American Health-Care Providers](#) (Journal of Perinatal Education, Winter 2011)

[Focusing on maternity and postpartum care for Black mothers leads to better outcomes](#) (American Psychological Association, October 2022)

[Can the African-American Diet be Made Healthier Without Giving up Culture](#) (University of New York, Spring 2009)

[WIC peer counselors’ perceptions of breastfeeding in African-American women with lower incomes](#) (Journal of Human Lactation, February 2015)

[The Historical, Psychosocial, and Cultural Context of Breastfeeding in the African American Community](#) (Mary Ann Liebert, Inc., February 12, 2021)

[A Within-Group Analysis of African American Mothers' Authoritarian Attitudes, Limit-Setting and Children's Self-Regulation](#) (Journal of Child Family Studies, March 26, 2017)

[Parenting In the Black Community: Why Raising Children Is Different for Us](#) (Atlanta Black Star, July 14, 2025)

[African American Contributions to Memorial Day](#) (National Park Service, September 27, 2023)

Reference – Complete Listing of Hyperlinks

[African American Contributions to Memorial Day](https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/african-american-memorial-day.htm) (https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/african-american-memorial-day.htm)

[Ethnic Cuisine- A Bridge to Health Equity](https://www.todaydietitian.com/newarchives/0219p24.shtml)
(https://www.todaydietitian.com/newarchives/0219p24.shtml)

[African Heritage Diet](https://oldwayspt.org/traditional-diets/african-heritage-diet) (https://oldwayspt.org/traditional-diets/african-heritage-diet)

[Heritage Diets and Culturally Appropriate Dietary Advice May Help Combat Chronic Diseases](https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2756956)
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[Cultural Diversity: eating in America, African-American](https://d7sandbox.cfaes.ohio-state.edu/sites/ctsandbox/files/imce/pdf_newsletters/5250.pdf) (https://d7sandbox.cfaes.ohio-state.edu/sites/ctsandbox/files/imce/pdf_newsletters/5250.pdf)

[African American Women's Preparation for Childbirth From the Perspective of African American Health-Care Providers](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3209742/) (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3209742/)

[Focusing on maternity and postpartum care for Black mothers leads to better outcomes](https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/10/better-care-black-mothers)
(https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/10/better-care-black-mothers)

[Can the African-American Diet be Made Healthier Without Giving up Culture](https://www.york.cuny.edu/english/writing-program/the-york-scholar-1/volume-5.2-spring-2009/can-the-african-american-diet-be-made-healthier-without-giving-up-culture)
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[WIC peer counselors' perceptions of breastfeeding in African-American women with lower incomes](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4327816/) (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4327816/)

[The Historical, Psychosocial, and Cultural Context of Breastfeeding in the African American Community](https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/bfm.2020.0316) (https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/bfm.2020.0316)

[A Within-Group Analysis of African American Mothers' Authoritarian Attitudes, Limit-Setting and Children's Self-Regulation](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5386503/) (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5386503/)

[Parenting In the Black Community: Why Raising Children Is Different for Us](https://atlantablackstar.com/2015/07/14/psychology-parenting-exploring-new-ideas-black-motherhood-fatherhood/)
(https://atlantablackstar.com/2015/07/14/psychology-parenting-exploring-new-ideas-black-motherhood-fatherhood/)

[African American Contributions to Memorial Day](https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/african-american-memorial-day.htm) (https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/african-american-memorial-day.htm)

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