

Asian Cuisine with Heart

Asian Americans include racial and ethnic groups originating from several world regions and countries. Each group has distinct traditions and preferences, including unique ways of preparing and eating foods. As with all dietary patterns, certain qualities or practices may increase or decrease risk of heart disease and diabetes.

Many Asian cuisines include healthy soybeans and other plant-based protein sources, unsweetened tea, fruits and vegetables. But whole grains and dietary fiber can be limited in those that rely on refined grains such as white rice. Saturated fat and sodium intake can also be too high due to the use of coconut and palm oil and condiments like soy sauce.



Geographic differences in cuisine

It's helpful to outline the differences in Asian cuisine to understand which regional dishes are offering health benefits – and where there are opportunities for dietary improvements. *Here are some key differences in regional cuisine.*

Diets from Southeast Asia feature:

- Healthy cooking, such as grilling, stir-frying and braising.
- Lean proteins like poultry and fish.
- Dishes that include vegetables and citrus juices.

But, Southeast Asian cuisine has room for nutritional improvement, as it often lacks fresh fruit and incorporates a high amount of saturated fat and sodium, from cooking oils like coconut and palm oil and ingredients like soy sauce, fish sauce and coconut milk.

Diets from South Asia are known for:

- Vegetarian dishes that are high in dietary fiber from foods like lentils, peas and beans.
- Heavy use of spices for flavor like cumin, curry and cloves.
- Mixing vegetables into many dishes and stews.
- Whole wheat roti.

But, cuisine from this region also includes a heavy use of refined grain and white rice, high saturated fat and cholesterol from meat and coconut oil, and a lack of fresh fruits.

Diets from Northeast Asia incorporate:

- Soy-based protein.
- Fresh ingredients.
- Wide variety of cooking methods including steaming, boiling, stewing, roasting and sautéing.
- Fish, seafood and poultry.
- Buckwheat noodles in Japanese dishes.

But, diets from Northeast Asia also include high saturated fat and cholesterol from animal protein and organ meat, a lack of dietary fiber and high sodium from preserved meats and condiments such as soy and fish sauce.

How to enjoy Asian cultural cuisines AND protect your heart:

- Switch to more whole grains, such as brown or black rice, buckwheat noodles and whole-grain flour.
- In addition to including soybean products and fish, use lean versions of beef, pork and chicken and reduce organ meats.
- Use low-fat coconut milk or substitute with other nondairy alternatives.
- Replace cooking oils that are high in saturated fat (coconut, palm, ghee) with oils lower in saturated fat (canola, safflower, sunflower oils).
- Select low-sodium foods and continue to use fresh or dried herbs and spices to flavor food.
- Increase the use of dairy or fortified nondairy products for calcium and vitamin D.