

The Indigenous Plate: Balancing Tradition and Health

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Disclosure

No conflict of interest

Learning Objectives

1

Understand the historical shifts in American Indigenous Alaskan Natives (AI/AN) nutrition.

2

Explore traditional foods by region and their health benefits.

3

Empower educators with strategies to promote culturally rooted nutrition.

Nutrient-Rich Traditional Foods

Traditional diets of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities offer many health benefits, including essential vitamins, minerals, fiber, and disease-fighting compounds.

Phytonutrients & Antioxidants:

- Found in traditional foods like wild berries, squash, corn, and leafy greens.
- Carotenoids (from sweet potatoes, pumpkins, and other colorful plants) support immune function and vision.

Variety of Nutrient-Dense Staples:

- **Fruits & Vegetables:** Wild greens, berries, and native plants provide fiber and micronutrients.
- **Grains & Legumes:** Corn, beans, and quinoa (a complete protein) offer plant-based protein and minerals.
- **Healthy Fats:** Wild-caught fish (salmon, trout), nuts, seeds, and avocado provide omega-3s and unsaturated fats.

Sustainable & Culturally Significant Foods:

- Traditional harvesting methods (fishing, hunting, gathering) promote physical activity and cultural preservation.

Nutrient-Rich Traditional Foods by Region

Southwest: Navajo, Pueblo, Apache, Hopi, Ute, Zuni



**Wild Game
(Deer, Rabbit):**
Lean protein,
iron



Corn (Maize):
Fiber, B
vitamins,
antioxidants



Tepary Beans:
High protein,
high in fiber



Cholla Buds:
Blood-sugar
regulating fiber

Nutrient-Rich Traditional Foods by Region

Great Plains: (Lakota, Cheyenne, Blackfeet, Crow, Comanche, Gros Ventre, Plains Cree, Ojibwe, Tonkawa, Nakoda, Lipan)



Bison: Leaner than beef, rich in iron & omega-3s



Chokecherries & Juneberries: Antioxidants, fiber



Timpisila (Prairie Turnip): Prebiotic fiber for gut health

Nutrient-Rich Traditional Foods by Region

Pacific Northwest: (Tlingit, Haida, Salish, Chinook, Kwakwaka'waka)



Salmon: Omega-3s,
Vitamin D, Protein



Camas Root: Slow-
digesting carbs,
inulin (prebiotic)



Huckleberries:
Anti-inflammatory

Nutrient-Rich Traditional Foods by Region

Eastern Woodlands (Cherokee, Iroquois, Ojibwe, Anishinaabe, Lenape, Wabanaki)



Three Sisters (Corn, Beans, Squash):
Complete protein, fiber, carbohydrates



Wild Greens (Ramps, Fiddleheads): Fiber, Vitamins A & C



Maple Syrup:
Manganese, zinc

Nutrient-Rich Traditional Foods by Region

Alaska Native (Iñupiat, Yup'ik, Athabascan, Aleut)



**Seal & Whale
Blubber:** Healthy fats
for Arctic survival.



**Fermented Fish
(Stinkheads):**
Natural probiotics.



**Wild Berries
(Crowberries,
Salmonberries):**
Vitamin C

Loss of access to Traditional Foods

Pre-Contact: Nutrient-Dense, Sustainable Diets (Before 1500s)

- **Diverse, regionally adapted foods:** Hunting, fishing, foraging, and farming provided balanced nutrition.

Colonization & Forced Dietary Shifts (1500s–1950s)

- **Land Loss & Displacement:** Restricted access to traditional hunting/farming grounds.
- **Government Commodity Foods:** Introduced processed, nutrient-poor staples (lard, white flour, sugar, canned meats).
- **Boarding Schools & Cultural Erasure:** Children punished for eating traditional foods, forced onto Western diets.
- **Bison Slaughter:** U.S. government decimated bison herds to weaken Plains tribes.

Modern Consequences (1950s–Present)

- **Food Deserts & Health Crisis:** High rates of diabetes, obesity, and heart disease.

Modern Dietary Challenges

Some modern adaptations introduce health risks, such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease.



Cooking Methods

- **Deep-frying:** Some dishes, like frybread or fried meats, increase fat intake.
- **High-fat animal products:** Frequent use of lard, butter, or fatty meats in cooking.



Processed & Sugary Foods

- **Sugary drinks:** Sweetened beverages contribute to diabetes risk.
- **Refined carbohydrates:** White flour, sugar, and processed foods replace whole traditional grains.

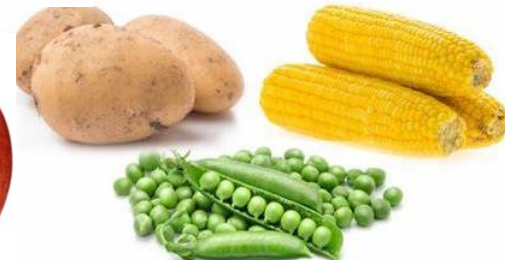
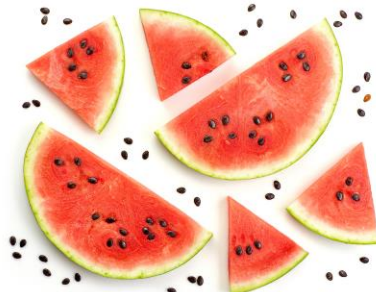
Respectful Shifts in Cooking & Eating Patterns

Education on what canned foods to choose:

- **Choose** vegetables canned in water.
- **Choose** fruit canned in 100% fruit juice.
- **Rinse** canned meats to reduce sodium.
- **Mix with vegetables** (onions, peppers, tomatoes) to add fiber.

Education on foods containing carbohydrates:

- **Discuss** carbohydrates found in fruits, dairy, and vegetables.
- **Discuss** the benefits of complex carbohydrates



Respectful Shifts in Cooking & Eating Patterns

Education on non-starchy vegetables:

- **Make** ½ your plate a non starchy vegetable or two fist sizes.
- **Choose** vegetables like tomatoes, summer squash, broccoli, cabbage, peppers, green beans, and celery (canned and frozen are ok).
- **Discuss** how non-starchy vegetables contain fiber, vitamins and minerals and have little effect on blood sugars.



Respectful Shifts in Cooking & Eating Patterns

Education
on what
proteins
to
choose:

- **Discuss** choosing lean proteins such as ground beef (90% lean), chicken without the skin, low fat cheese, and fish.



Respectful Shifts in Cooking & Eating Patterns

Try healthier cooking methods



Sautee
potatoes



Baked SPAM
(instead of
fried)



Roasted
vegetables

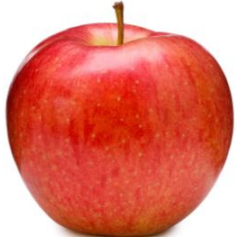


Crockpot
meals

Educators Practice Humiliation and Empathy

Some people do not want to change a meal:

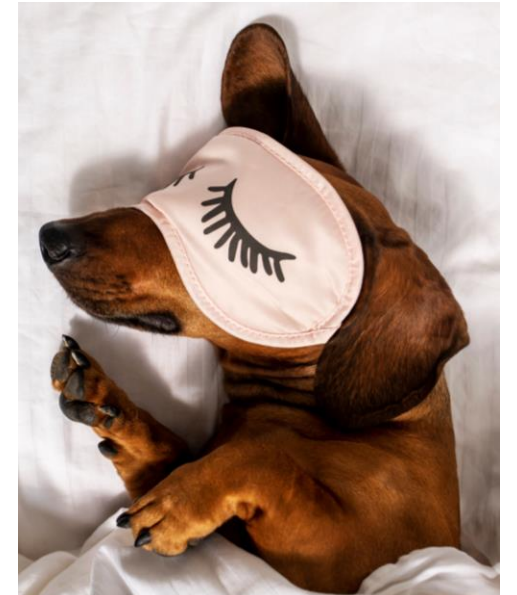
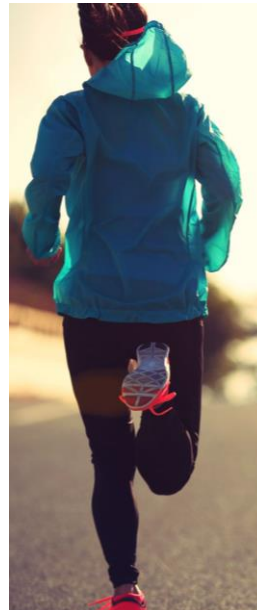
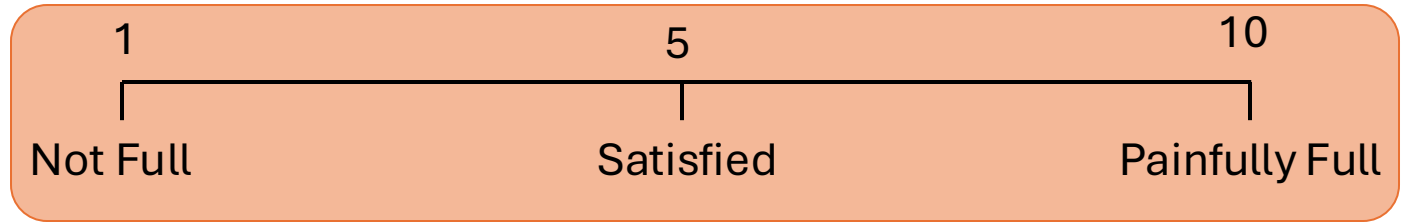
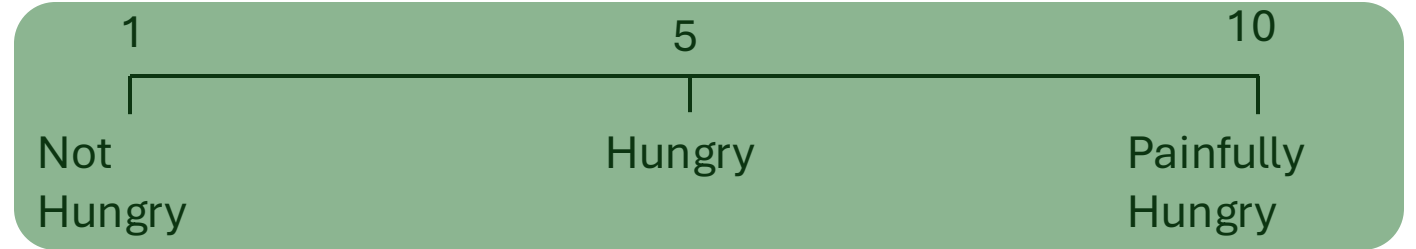
- **Focus** on adding more vegetables
- **Focus** on adding more fruits



Educators Practice Humiliation and Empathy

Focus on Healthy Cues:

- **Discuss** hunger and fullness cues
- **Discuss** the benefits of rest
- **Discuss** the benefits of physical activity



Thank you

- Books:

- Braiding Sweet Grass
- Food Sovereignty in the United States
- Indigenous Home Cooking Menus
Inspired by the Ancestors
- Sioux Chef

- Online resources:



Traditional Foods Resource Guide



10 Fact Sheet Traditional Native Food



My Native Plate