

Exploring African American Culture

Background



African American history dates back to early American slavery in the 17th to the 19th centuries, when an estimated 10 million Africans were brought to the Americas during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Most resided in the South, working on rice, cotton, tobacco, and indigo plantations. With abolition efforts, the Civil War, and the Emancipation Proclamation by Abraham Lincoln, slavery ended in the United States. Early abolitionists, including Frederick Douglas and Booker T. Washington, and Civil Rights activists, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, revolutionized the integration of African Americans into the culture today.

Traditions and Customs

Many African Americans shared customs and traditions through oral history, such as stories, songs, and traditional folk dance. In the last century, jazz, rap, ragtime, and blues, then later hip hop, grew in popularity. Typical African American culture shares strong religious values in churches, with vibrant dresses and suits worn on Sundays. Hip-hop fashion, saggy pants, and name-brand clothing are very popular among the African American community.



Holidays and Celebrations



African Americans celebrate several holidays throughout the year. Black History Month is celebrated in February each year in the U.S., recognizing African Americans' rich history and values. Juneteenth, or Freedom Day on June 19, is a holiday marking the end of slavery in the U.S. Also, many African Americans observe Kwanzaa, which is celebrated from December 26 through January 31. A table is decorated with a kinara, or candleholder, with three red candles, three green candles, and one black center candle, also known as the unity candle. During Kwanzaa, families celebrate by singing and dancing, playing African drums, and eating traditional African American foods.

Education and Literacy

Among African Americans, higher education is valued and encouraged.



Health Disparities

There is a high incidence of diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and obesity among African Americans. Also, African Americans account for one-third of all patients receiving dialysis in the U.S., which is three times the rate of whites.

Traditional Food Practices

Traditionally, African American foods are associated with Southern foods, also called soul food. African American people passed down traditional foodways from generation to generation, and cooking has become a way to express feelings and nurture family and friends. Those preparing the meals and those around the table enjoy a social aspect and build traditions by regularly sharing family meals. Soul food consists of readily available foods, including beans and peas, collard greens, turnip greens, tomatoes, okra, sweet potatoes, rice, corn or cornmeal, pork, fish, and chicken. Fried chicken, greens, black-eyed peas, tomatoes, and cornbread with sweet potato pie are popular dishes.



Considerations for WIC Educators and Counselors

- Encourage families to explore ways to prepare traditional foods using less saturated fats, salt, and sugar while maintaining the flavor and texture of favorite dishes.
- Because honoring traditional meals is important to African American families, suggest adding plenty of vegetables for a nutritious meal.
- Introduce fresh fruits and vegetables with soul foods to young children when the family gathers at the table.
- Many African Americans have lactose intolerance and avoid dairy, which may lead to inadequate calcium and vitamin D intake. Encourage alternative ways to increase calcium and vitamin D intake.
- Some clients may not breast/chestfeed due to the historical implications of slavery and wet nursing.



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