

Exploring the Jamaican Culture

Background

Jamaica is the third-largest island country in the Caribbean Sea and one of many English-speaking countries in this area. Christopher Columbus, who first sighted the island in 1494, considered it to be one of the most beautiful islands. The vast majority of its inhabitants are of African ancestry, descendants of slaves brought by European colonists. Jamaica became independent from the United Kingdom in 1962 yet remains part of the British Commonwealth today.



Traditions and Customs

The Jamaican culture is rich in folklore, traditions, and rituals, with a mix of African and European influences. Family life is central to most Jamaicans, and it is common for three generations to share a home. Grandmothers often tend to preschool-age children, and wealthier families employ domestic helpers. The climate is tropical, with hot and humid weather, as Jamaica lies in the hurricane belt of the Atlantic Ocean. Reggae music was popularized by the famous Jamaican musician Bob Marley. Also, Jamaicans participate in sports, such as cricket and track and field, with dozens of world-class sprinters, including the famous Olympian Usain Bolt.



Holidays and Celebrations

Jamaicans love to celebrate throughout the year with many holidays and festivals. Some of the most important ones are Independence Day on August 6, Emancipation Day on August 1, and Carnival in April. Christmas celebrations are filled with extravagant light displays, festive music, and traditional foods, as most Jamaicans practice Christianity.



Education and Literacy

Jamaica is regarded as a bilingual country. Although English is the official language, the primary spoken language is Jamaican Patois, a Creole language with a mix of African and English dialects. Jamaica's school system includes preschool, primary, and secondary schools.

Health Issues

The leading cause of death is stroke, followed by diabetes and heart disease. HIV/AIDS is the leading cause of death for children under age five.



Traditional Food Practices

Jamaican cuisine is a flavorful and aromatic blend of African, Indian, Spanish, and British influences. The most popular Jamaican dish is jerk chicken, which is chicken baked in a jerk spice blend of cinnamon, cloves, ginger, thyme, garlic, pepper, and nutmeg. Breakfast is often callaloo (cooked greens) and plantain. The national dish ackee (African fruit) and saltfish are often served with cooked tomatoes, onions, and spices.



Considerations for WIC Educators and Counselors

- Many consume traditional foods despite living away from their country for many years.
- Average nutrient intakes are well above dietary recommendations, except for fiber and vitamin E.
- The average daily intake of carbohydrates and fats is more than double the recommendations.
- Portion sizes tend to be large and hearty.
- Many frequently consume excessive amounts of sodium and sugar-sweetened beverages.
- Fruit and vegetable intake is lower than the recommended amounts.
- Many enjoy sedentary activities.

Recommended counseling tips:

- Encourage intake of more fruits and vegetables to meet recommendations.
- Reduce fats, specifically saturated fats and sodium intake.
- Encourage water with meals to replace sugary beverages.
- Discuss appropriate portions and serving sizes.
- Encourage daily physical activity.



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