

# The healthiest eaters are the most culturally 'fit'

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How to be a healthy eater depends on culture. A recent study shows that in the U.S. and Japan, people who fit better with their culture have healthier eating habits. The results appear in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

"Our results suggest that if you want to help people to eat healthier—or if you want to promote any type of healthy behavior—you want to understand what meaning that behavior has in that culture, and what motivates people to be healthy in that culture," says lead author Cynthia Levine.

Healthy eating can help reduce one's risk for a number of different diseases down the line, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and certain types of cancer.

"In the U.S., having choice and control and being independent are very important," says Levine. "Giving people lots of healthy choices or allowing people to feel that they have control over whether they eat healthy options is likely to foster healthier eating."

In Japan where the culture places more emphasis on interdependence and maintaining relationships, a focus on choice and control is less likely to be the key to more healthy eating, write the authors.

"Instead," says Levine, "in Japan, promoting healthy eating is likely to be most effective when it builds on and strengthens social bonds."

## Research

In a series of studies, the international team of researchers from the U.S., Japan, and Chile analyzed samples of [eating habits](#) of middle-aged adults in the United States and Japan. The researcher's utilized data that included how often people eat certain items each week, including fish, vegetables, or sugary beverages, as well as some information on cholesterol and how participants relate to food when under stress.

To understand how well people in each country fit in with the predominant culture, participants responded to a series of statements such as "I act in the same way no matter who I am with" (a statement reflecting independence) or "My happiness depends on the happiness of those around me" (a statement reflecting interdependence). Participants with high scores on independence have the best cultural fit in the U.S. Participants with high scores on interdependence have the best cultural fit in Japan.

## Healthy Habits

In the U.S., which favors independence, being independent predicted eating a healthy diet including higher amounts of fish, protein, fruit, vegetables, and fewer sugary beverages. The research also showed the more independent adults were less likely to use food as a way to cope with stress.

While the overall diets in Japan were healthier than U.S. participants, those in Japan who rated themselves as more interdependent showed healthier eating habits than their Japanese peers who did not.

This research is consistent with other work showing that fitting into one's culture shapes the healthiness of one's food consumption.

Levine is interested in utilizing these results for future studies that further reveal the role of culture in everyday behaviors.

"We would like to explore how these cultural differences in the meanings of common behaviors can be utilized to encourage [healthy eating](#) or healthy behaviors," says Levine.

Provided by Society for Personality and Social Psychology

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