

CARIBBEAN

The Caribbean region consists of approximately 7,000 islands and surrounding coastal areas with blended cultures and traditions from native islanders, Africa, Europe, Latin America, China, the Middle East, India, and Southern Asia. The predominant spoken languages include Spanish, French, English, Dutch, Haitian Creole, and Papiamentu, as well as local Creole and other dialects. Within the Caribbean area there can be found a variety of sub-regional cultures, customs and traditions. The region exhibits wide disparities in income, essential resources, and access to health care. The incidence of obesity and obesity-related conditions is rapidly rising in the Caribbean area, even though 25% of the people in the region live in poverty.



Common Nutritional Approaches

Caribbean cuisine traces its origins from pre-existing Taino Indian and Afro-Caribbean cooking techniques and local fruits, herbs, spices, fish and meats of the West Indies, blended with culinary influences from around the globe. There are local traditional food favorites within the individual islands and countries that comprise the Caribbean area. However, there are commonalities in food staples between the islands, including fresh fruits, leafy greens and vegetables, rice stews and soups. Popular meats include fish, pork, poultry, beef and goat. Caribbean cuisine is often recognized for its bold, savory and spiced flavors. Coconut milk is widely used to make numerous dishes. Common sources of carbohydrates in Caribbean foods are rice, plantains (green and ripe), bread/roti, corn, pasta, beans and carrots.

The region has access to an abundance of healthy vegetables, fruits, spices, meat and fish; however, there is significant exposure to ultra-processed foods high in sugar, high in glycemic carbohydrates, fat and sodium.



Practical Tips and Substitutions for Eating Healthy

- ➔ Prepare foods by sauteing, broiling, baking, grilling or stewing rather than frying.
- ➔ Reduce salt and season food with the flavorful traditional Caribbean spices like curry, all spice, ginger, herbs and traditional Caribbean spices.
- ➔ Encourage the consumption of healthy, natural whole foods instead of sugar-sweetened ultra-processed foods and beverages.
- ➔ Substitute refined carbohydrates for complex carbohydrates in recipes. For example, brown rice or quinoa can be a substitute for long-grain white rice. A low-carbohydrate substitute is also cauliflower rice. Limit other starches like corn or white potatoes, which can be substituted for sweet potatoes or cassava.
- ➔ Bananas, mangos, pineapples and oranges are high in sugar and should be eaten in moderation. Choose low-sugar fruits such as berries as an alternative.
- ➔ Choose seafood and leaner meats as a protein source.
- ➔ Incorporate more unsaturated fats such as olive oil, canola oil, and avocado into meals.



Healthful Eating Plan & Meal Ideas

Breakfast Ideas

- Roasted Fish with Ackee: Ackee is high in healthy fat. Roasted fish, however, is lower in salt than traditional codfish that ackee is usually served with.
- Boiled eggs with lower sugar fruit salad
- Boiled plantain with ackee +/- poached egg white

Lunch/Dinner Ideas

- Roasted fish with baked sweet potato and greens such as callaloo
- 1 cup brown rice and beans with avocado salad
- Jerk Chicken with 1 cup rice and beans OR with baked sweet potato
- Baked/roasted chicken with 2 tablespoons stew (instead of cooking in stew) with cauliflower rice and beans
- Baked sweet potato with sauteed cabbage and mixed vegetables



Clinical Pearls

- ✓ Recognize that poverty, food insecurity, and social norms are major contributors to the consumption of unhealthy, ultra-processed foods in much of the Caribbean region.
- ✓ Be aware that obesity, hypertension, diabetes and other obesity-related conditions are prevalent in the area.
- ✓ Advise patients that it is possible to eat your traditional Caribbean foods and thrive on a weight & wellness journey. Giving up all commonly-eaten foods at the same time may not work long term. Consider more gradual modifications by making one meaningful nutrition change per week.

References: Harris, R.M., Rose, A.M.C., Hambleton, I.R. et al. (2018). Sodium and potassium excretion in an adult Caribbean population of African descent with a high burden of cardiovascular disease. *BMC Public Health* 18, 998 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-018-5694-0>; Harvard T.H. Chan SPH (2019, September 24). What Should I Eat? The Nutrition Source. Retrieved 30 June 2021 from <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/what-should-you-eat/>; Haffizulla, F. S., Ramoutar, A., Eason, A., & Hardigan, P. (2020). Caribbean Diaspora Healthy Nutrition Outreach Project (CDHNOP): A Qualitative and Quantitative Approach to Caribbean Health. *Annals of global health*, 86(1), 12. <https://doi.org/10.5334/aogh.2657>; Gonsahn-Bollie, S. (2021). Embrace You: Your Guide to Transforming Weight Loss Misconceptions Into Lifelong Wellness. Publish Your Gift.; Caribbean cuisine - Wikipedia; UN spotlights 'explosive' obesity rates, hunger in Latin America and Caribbean | UN News

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