Latin Diet Good for Your Health

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Mexican food is not healthy – that is what we hear on TV and newspapers. And, it’s not true! A Mexican-American nurse friend of mine was so frustrated at this error in describing her cultural foods that she was inspired to put together a cookbook of her Mom’s traditional foods changed little to make the recipes ‘heart healthy’.

The traditional diet of Latin America is very different from the westernized versions we have here: cheesy enchiladas and greasy tacos to name a few. The Latin diet is influenced by the Aztec, Mayan and Incan cultures. The key foods in a traditional diet include beans, grains, potatoes, tomatoes, chilies, avocados, corn, vegetables, legumes, and spices. These are all foods health experts now know are part of a disease-protective diet. And, there are many healthful habits in a traditional diet: combining colorful fruits and vegetables, a focus on eating ‘real’ food instead of processed food, and an emphasis on plant proteins such as beans and legumes.

Americanized translations of Mexican foods have changed them in ways that are less healthful: giant fried tostadas, overstuffed burritos and deep-fried chips and salsa. Health problems for Latinos are connected to higher levels of obesity and chronic diseases. These are sometimes connected to the diet changes that have become more common to living in the U.S. Here, the foods that are cheap, fast and easy to find in neighborhoods are fast foods and foods high in red meat, refined grains, sugar and fat – not healthy choices.

Be a positive role model for the children and grandchildren in your family by re-introducing traditional ways of preparing Latin foods for meals. The health of the whole family will improve.

Source: 2010 Environmental Nutrition

Healthy Latin Foods: add them to your daily diet.

**Vegetables:** cabbage, carrots, chayote, chiles, eggplant, garlic jicama, kale, lettuce, maize/corn, nopales, peppers, potatoes, pumpkin, onion, okra, spinach, yams, yuca, zucchini.

**Fruits:** Agave, avocados, bananas, coconut, grapefruit, guava, lemons, limes, mangoes, melons, oranges, papayas, passion fruit, pineapple, plantains, pomegranate, prickly pear, pumpkin, quince, starfruit, tangerine, tomatoes, tomatillas.

**Grains:** amaranth, maize/corn, quinoa, rice.

**Herbs, spices:** Chiles, cilantro, cinnamon, epazote, garlic, oregano, parsley.

Creative Living is written by University of Missouri Extension Regional Specialists for seniors in English and Spanish. This newsletter is a partnership among the Guadalupe Center, Alzheimer’s Association, and University of Missouri Extension. If you have any suggestions for its content, please contact Nina Chen, Ph.D., Human Development Specialist, 816-252-5051.

*Spanish translation provided by Kelly Loeb, MSW through Support of Alzheimer’s Association.