

Crossroads of Nutrition and Culture: Tips for the Food and Nutrition Professional Counseling African Americans

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DIABETES PREVALENCE

Diabetes has reached epidemic proportions among African Americans. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the prevalence of diabetes among African Americans has quadrupled during the past 30 years (1). Among African Americans aged 20 years and older, about 3.2 million or 13.3% have diabetes. On average, African Americans are 1.8 times more likely to develop diabetes as non-Hispanic whites of similar age (2).

Compared with other Americans, African Americans are also disproportionately affected by three of the major diabetes complications:

- Diabetic nephropathy: African Americans are 2.6 to 5.6 times as likely to suffer from kidney disease, with more than 4,000 new cases of end-stage renal disease each year.
- Diabetic retinopathy: African Americans are twice as likely to develop diabetes retinopathy as non-Hispanic whites.
- Amputations: African Americans are 2.7 times as likely to suffer lower-limb amputations (3).

The aforementioned statistics serve to underscore the need for dietetic professionals to work aggressively with this group, providing culturally competent medical nutrition therapy in an effort to improve these outcomes.

SOUL FOOD CUISINE

African Americans have their origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa. Many African Americans have been in the United States for generations and others are recent immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean or West Indies. African Americans are represented throughout the country, but most can be found in the Southeast and mid-Atlantic regions, especially Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina and Maryland (1).

The foods found in these regions make up the Southern cuisine that has become

synonymous with soul food. The term soul food can be traced back to the 1960s when terms like “soul man”, “soulful” and just “soul” were used in connection with African Americans themselves (4). Many African Americans will tell you that soul food is not a list of actual foods but a state of mind. Others insist that soul food “embodies an almost spiritual essence” (5).

Candied yams, collard greens, fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, fried catfish, Hoppin’ John (black-eyed peas), hush puppies, chittlins, (chitterlings), trotters (pigs feet) and corn pone with pot liquor are just a few of the dishes that, when prepared in traditional ways using bacon drippings, fatback or smoked ham hocks, can be high in fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium and calories. However, most soul food dishes can be easily transformed into healthier versions rich in vitamins, minerals, carbohydrate and fiber. Bacon drippings can be replaced with olive or canola oil. Fatback and smoked ham hocks can be replaced with skinless smoked turkey necks or smoke flavoring.

Caribbean cuisine is also part of the African American experience. Along with traditional soul food it is not uncommon to see bammy, akee, stamp and go (codfish fritters), callaloo, curried goat, escoveitch fish or fried plantain grace the buffet table. Food and nutrition professionals must be careful not to make assumptions regarding food practices and preference based on region and ethnicity alone. Instead assess

the individual’s degree of affiliation with the ethnic group (6).

As evidenced by some of the names given to traditional dishes it is not always clear what the ingredients are. To effectively counsel and gain the trust of African Americans with diabetes it is imperative that food and nutrition professionals learn the “language” of the soul food cuisine.

DICTIONARY OF SOUL FOOD TERMS (7)

Ackee or akee: Introduced to Jamaica from Africa, ackee is a bright red fruit that is poisonous if eaten before fully mature. When ripe, it will burst open to reveal three large black seeds and bright yellow flesh. Cooked ackee has a soft texture and resembles scrambled eggs. Ackee and salt fish is the preferred breakfast of Jamaicans. It is also served with bammy, dumplings, plantains or yams. This Caribbean fruit is very high in fat and calories.
½ cup raw ackee: 180 calories, 17.5 g. fat, 5.5 g. carbohydrate.

Bammy: Jamaican cassava flatbread descended from the bread eaten by Jamaica’s original inhabitants, the Arawak Indians. Bammy is often buttered and eaten with fish. Many bammy recipes call for soaking the bread in coconut milk before frying.
One bammy (before soaking or frying): approximately 15 cm. diameter, 1½ cm. thick will yield: 217 calories, a trace of fat, 53.5 g. carbohydrate and 325 mg. sodium.

Callaloo: A bitter-tasting, heart-shaped leaf of the taro plant typically cooked like spinach and served with okra, onion, pepper, pork or ham and shellfish. Like other greens, callaloo can be found both fresh and canned in West Indian markets. Callaloo is an excellent source of calcium, potassium and vitamin A.
½ cup steamed callaloo: 19 calories, 0.2 g. fat, 3.7 g. carbohydrate.

Chittlins: Chitterlings are the small intestines of a pig. Chitterlings can be purchased in most African American neighborhoods. They are usually cooked in a vinegared stock, after which they may be battered and fried. Chitterlings are high in

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saturated fat and cholesterol and should be reserved for special occasions.

1 ounce chitterlings: 51 calories, 5 g. fat, 2 g. saturated fat, 43 mg. cholesterol.

Escoveitch Fish: This dish can be made with snapper, jacks, sprats, parrot, grunt or kingfish. Escoveitch fish may be served as part of breakfast, lunch or dinner. Traditionally Escoveitch fish is served with bammy, hard-dough bread, festival (similar to hush puppies) or Johnnycakes. Each 4-ounce portion made using a traditional recipe with snapper, canola oil, onions, scotch bonnet peppers, pimento berries and vinegar yields : 148 calories, 4 g. fat, 6 g. carbohydrate.

Fatback: The clear fat from the back of a loin of pork. It may or may not be salt-cured. Fatback is used in many southern recipes. When it is rendered, fatback is called lard, and it is traditionally used as fat for frying chicken or fish. Vegetable oil or reduced-calorie margarine can be substituted in most recipes. Authentic dishes using fatback should be reserved for special occasions only.

1 teaspoon fatback: 39 calories, 4.3 g. fat, 1.7 g. saturated fat.

Hoppin' John: Said to have originated with African slaves on southern plantations, Hoppin' John is a dish of black-eyed peas cooked with salt pork and seasonings and served with cooked rice. Many African Americans believe that eating black-eyed peas on New Year's Day will bring good luck for the rest of the year. Using skinless smoked turkey necks instead of the salt pork will reduce the fat content and maintain the traditional flavor of this dish. Black-eyed peas are high in calcium, folate, vitamin A and fiber.

Black-eyed peas cooked: 1 cup 160 calories, 1 g. fat, 34 g. carbohydrate and 8.3 g. fiber.

Johnnycake: Also called hoecake, and thought to be the precursor of the pancake, the johnnycake dates back to the early 1700s. It's a flat griddlecake (about 7" in diameter) made of cornmeal, salt, and either boiling water or cold milk. The Caribbean version is made with flour. 1 johnnycake: 134 calories, 3.5 g. fat, 21 g. carbohydrate and 430 mg. sodium.

Pot likker (liquor): The vitamin-rich liquid left after cooking greens, vegetables or meat. This broth is traditionally served with corn bread or corn pone. Historically it is thought that the vitamins in pot liquor supplemented the nutrient-deficient diet of slaves.

Stamp and go: Spicy hot fritters made with salted codfish, popular throughout the Caribbean. Codfish fritters are traditionally fried in coconut oil. Corn oil can be substituted for the coconut oil.

1 ounce dehydrated salted codfish: 104 calories, 0.8 g. fat, 2250 mg. sodium.

Trotters: These are the feet and ankles of a pig. Because they are bonny and sinewy, pig's feet require long, slow cooking. Pig's feet are available pickled, fresh and smoked. Southerners eat pig's feet with vinegar or hot sauce. Pig's feet are high in fat, saturated fat and cholesterol and should be eaten only on special occasions.

1 ounce pig's feet: 59 calories, 4 g. fat, 1 g. saturated fat, 25 mg. cholesterol.

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