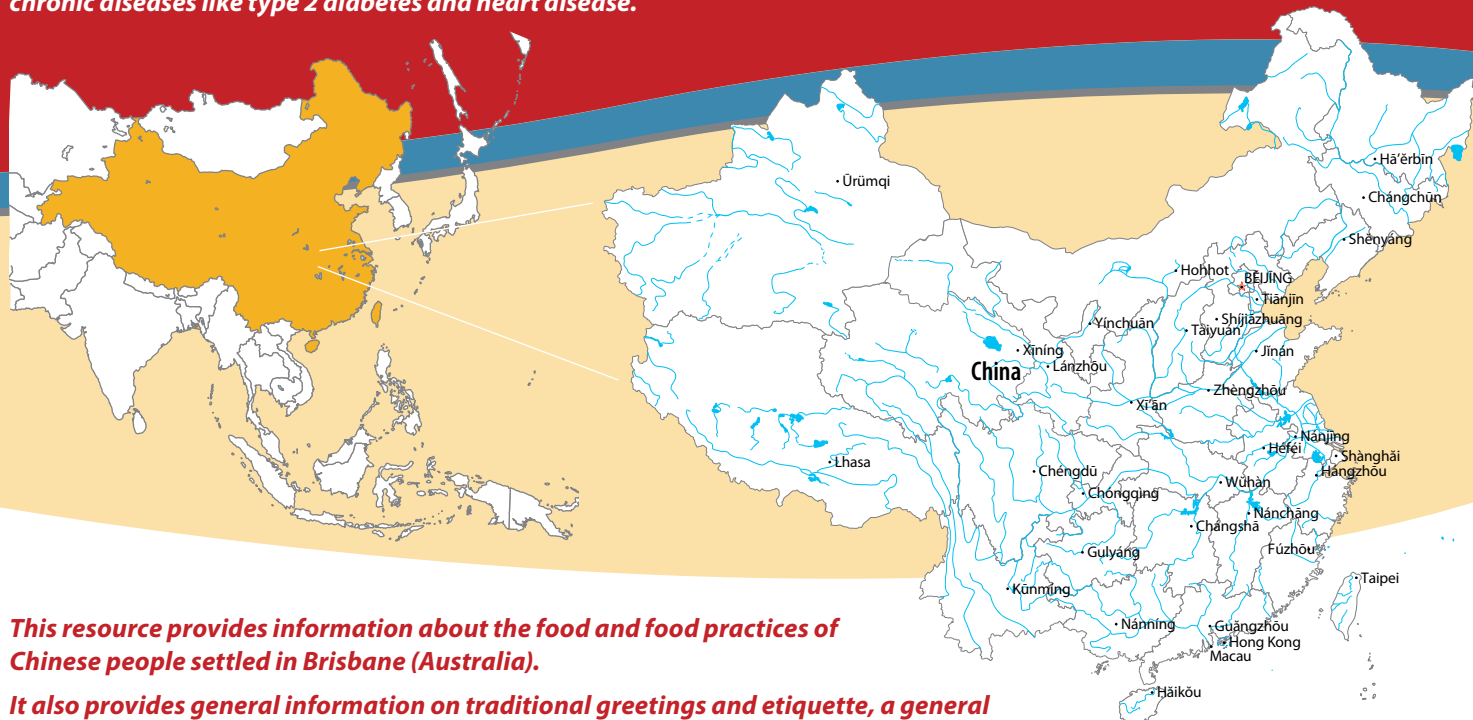


# Food and cultural practices of the Chinese community in Australia - a community resource

Food is central to the cultural and religious practices of most communities. For this reason, understanding and appreciating the food and food practices of another culture is part of building your own cultural competence. What people eat is also important to their long-term health. When people migrate to Australia, changes to the food they eat and reductions in physical activity often result in poorer health in the long term. Common health problems include nutrition-related chronic diseases like type 2 diabetes and heart disease.



**This resource provides information about the food and food practices of Chinese people settled in Brisbane (Australia).**

**It also provides general information on traditional greetings and etiquette, a general background on their country and their health profile in Australia. For readers who are involved in nutrition education, there is also a section on culturally appropriate ways to approach this.**

## 1. Traditional greetings and etiquette

Common phrases in Mandarin

English	Mandarin	Pronunciation
Hello. How are you?	<i>Ni hao</i>	nee how
Good morning	<i>Zao shang hao</i>	jao shang how
Goodbye	<i>Zai jian</i>	zai jen
Yes	<i>Shi</i>	sher
No	<i>Bu shi</i>	boo sher
Thank you	<i>Xie xie</i>	shea shea

NOTE: Some Chinese people may feel that saying 'no' is impolite. They may answer 'yes' to questions, acknowledging that they are listening rather than agreeing.

## 2. Cultural information and migration history

<b>Ethnicity</b>	There are around 20 ethnic groups in China, with 91.6% of the population identifying as Han Chinese and 1.3% identifying as Zhuang. Other ethnic groups make up the remaining 7.1% of the population. <sup>1</sup>
<b>Religion</b>	In 2011, the major religions amongst Chinese-born people were Buddhism and Catholicism. Approximately 63.2% didn't follow a religion. <sup>2</sup>
<b>Language</b>	The main languages spoken at home by Chinese-born people in Australia are Mandarin and Cantonese. <sup>3</sup> Other major Chinese languages/dialects include Hokkien, Hakka, Shanghainese (Wu) and Teo Chew. <sup>1,4</sup> There are two written forms of the Chinese language: Traditional and Simplified.
<b>Migration history</b>	<p>Chinese immigration to Australia commenced almost 200 years ago, until it was restricted by the White Australia Policy. This policy was abolished in 1973 and was followed by a large increase in the number of Chinese migrants settling in Australia. In the 1980s, Australia began promoting education to fee-paying overseas students, resulting in an increase in the numbers of Chinese people settling in Australia, and this continues to increase.<sup>5</sup></p> <p>Many people from a Chinese background migrate to Australia from a number of different countries such as China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia and others. Therefore, people from a Chinese background may have other cultural influences on their diet.</p>
<b>Gender roles</b>	Within the Chinese community there are no clear or specific gender roles. Gender roles around food preparation, cooking and shopping differ between families and can be dependent on living arrangements. Gender roles seem to be determined by individual family preference rather than cultural influence.
<b>Household size</b>	In 2010, the average size of the family household in China was 3.1 persons. <sup>6</sup> This information is unknown for Chinese people living in Australia; however, household composition is available. In Australia, 2011, 70.9% of people born in China lived in one-family households, 5.1% lived in multiple-family households, 11.8% lived in single-person households, and 12.3% lived in group households. <sup>3</sup>
<b>Population in Australia</b>	In 2011, 866,200 people reported having Chinese ancestry. <sup>7</sup> At the 2011 Census, 319,969 Chinese-born (excluding SARs* and Taiwan-born) people were living in Australia. <sup>3</sup> The largest population of Chinese-born people lived in NSW (156,034), followed by Victoria (93,896) and Queensland (27,036) <sup>2</sup> , and populations were concentrated in large cities such as Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. <sup>8</sup>

\* Special Administrative Regions of China such as Hong Kong and Macau.

## 3. Health profile in Australia

<b>Life expectancy</b>	In China, the life expectancy is approximately 75 years. <sup>9</sup> Life expectancy is higher for women than men. Australian life expectancy for Chinese migrants is approximately 82 years. <sup>9</sup>
<b>New arrivals</b>	In 2011, Chinese people were the third-largest group of overseas-born residents, contributing to 1.8% (319,000) of Australia's population. <sup>10</sup> Chinese migrants are considered to be relatively new arrivals to the country, with median length of residence being eight years. Chinese migrants live in highly urbanised areas in Australia. <sup>10</sup>
<b>Chronic disease</b>	In China, chronic disease is thought to make up 79% of all deaths – 33% from cardiovascular disease, 17% from chronic respiratory disease, 20% from cancer, 1% from diabetes and 8% from other chronic diseases. Risk factors include diet, physical activity and the use of tobacco products. <sup>11</sup>

### 3. Health profile in Australia – continued

<b>Oral health</b>	<p>In Australia, many people from a culturally and linguistically diverse background can experience difficulties in accessing dental services, as with other health services, and therefore may experience negative effects on their oral health.<sup>12</sup> Further information about the oral health of people with a Chinese background living in Australia is unknown.</p> <p>In China, oral health practices vary significantly according to urbanisation and province. Knowledge of causes and prevention of dental diseases can be low. Some people from a Chinese background may pay no attention to signs of dental caries if there is no pain.<sup>13</sup></p>
<b>Social determinants of health and other influences</b>	<p>Poor English language skills may deter some Chinese migrants from using mainstream healthcare services. This group may also be at risk of poorer social and economic outcomes, which may further impact on their ability to access healthcare.</p>

### 4. Traditional food and food practices

China is a very diverse country with a large number of regions and a mix of urban and rural populations. There are six main regions, and food preparation is distinct to each of these regions: Peking (Beijing), Canton, Sichuan, Shanghai, Hokkien and Northern China. Due to the differences between regions, the information in this guide may not be applicable to all Chinese people.

#### Religious and cultural influences

In Chinese communities living in Australia, religion rarely impacts upon diet. The British colonisation of Hong Kong from 1898 to 1997 has led to slight westernisation of some food practices. Some people with a Chinese background may have grown up in countries other than China and may have other cultural influences on diet.

#### Traditional meals and snacks

<b>Breakfast</b>	<p>Hot foods such as rice porridge (<i>congee</i>), noodles, dim sum, dumplings, steamed buns, pickles, egg, meat or fish are eaten. People from Northern China may have pickled vegetables and roasted peanuts with <i>congee</i>.</p>
<b>Main and other meals</b>	<p>Lunch may comprise of hot foods such as rice or noodles and two to three dishes such as soup, a meat dish, vegetable or tofu dish. Each dish is prepared separately so that it is easy to share. In China, a sandwich is not considered to be a meal.</p> <p>Dinner is generally considered to be the main meal. It can be made up of hot foods similar to lunch but with extra dishes.</p>
<b>Fruit and vegetables</b>	<p>Commonly eaten vegetables include <i>wombok</i> (Chinese cabbage), <i>bok choy</i>, <i>pak choy</i>, <i>gai lan</i> (Chinese broccoli), <i>choy sum</i>, baby corn, cucumber and tomato.</p> <p>Common fruits include durian, star fruit, dragon fruit, longan, oranges, lychees, grapes, apples, mandarins, peaches, rambutans, apricots, pineapples and bananas.</p>
<b>Snacks</b>	<p>Packaged foods such as biscuits or chips are commonly eaten, as well as street foods such as steamed buns, meat skewers or noodles.</p>
<b>Beverages</b>	<p>Hot drinks such as Chinese green tea, coffee and tea are commonly consumed.</p> <p>It is uncommon for people with a Chinese background to drink alcohol frequently or in large amounts. If consumed, wine and beer may be preferred types of alcohol.</p>
<b>Celebration foods and religious food practices</b>	<p>Most special occasions will include some form of traditional foods, which are shared with the whole family. Chinese New Year is the most important event and many dishes such as chicken, fish and seafood are served in large portions to be shared. Dishes served on such occasions may convey a particular meaning, such as bringing wealth and health in the coming year. It is also common on traditional holidays or special occasions to consume cakes from glutinous rice and mooncake at the Mid-Autumn festival (see table below for description). Religion rarely impacts on diet in China.</p>

## Common traditional foods

### Roasted Peking duck



This is a famous dish from Beijing. The duck skin and meat are usually sliced into small pieces and eaten with scallion, cucumber and sweet bean sauce, and rolled up in a pancake.

### Sweet and sour pork



Pork is diced and stir-fried in sweet and sour sauce made up of sugar, ketchup, vinegar and soy sauce. This is usually cooked with capsicum and pineapple.

### Mapo tofu



Silken tofu is accompanied by minced ground beef and cooked in a spicy and hot pepper seasoning.

### Dumplings



Dumplings are often filled with beef, pork or chives. They can be steamed or fried and are usually dipped in black vinegar mixed with chilli sauce.

### Mooncakes



These round pastries are approximately 10 cm in diameter and 3 cm high with a thin crust. They are usually filled with red bean or lotus seed paste but may also contain yolks from salted duck eggs. They are eaten during the Mid-Autumn Festival and, more recently, used as a present for business clients and relatives.

## 5. Food habits in Australia

<b>Food practices</b>	<p><b>Common foods:</b> Common seasonings include light soy sauce, dark soy sauce (fermented for longer), sesame oil, five-spice powder, oyster sauce, rice wine, ginger and garlic. Potato starch is used for thickening and coating meat or fish before frying. Tapioca starch and corn flour can be a substitute.<sup>14</sup></p> <p><b>Meal patterns:</b> Consumption of three meals per day is common (breakfast, lunch and dinner). Dinner is usually the main meal.</p> <p><b>Eating practices:</b> It is common to share a number of dishes at the main meal. There are usually a variety of bowls and plates for rice, soup and vegetable/meat dishes. Ingredients for dishes are cut into small pieces so there is no need for cutting at the table. The entire family living in the household eats the main meal together at the table, and everyone starts the meal at the same time. Chopsticks, knives and forks are the common eating utensils used. Flat-bottomed spoons are used to eat soup.</p>
<b>Adaptations to diet in Australia</b>	<p><b>Substitute foods:</b> Access to basic traditional foods is quite high, but the variety of Chinese food items such as vegetables is much lower and may be difficult to source; hence many older Chinese migrants grow their own Chinese vegetables at home to ensure variety.</p> <p><b>Changes to diet:</b> Some Chinese may now consume toast for breakfast and a sandwich or salad for lunch, and dairy consumption may have increased after migration to Australia. Fresh fish consumption may decrease after migration to Australia due to a decrease in its availability. Some snack foods may be adopted after moving to Australia, including potato chips, corn chips and chocolate.</p>
<b>Cooking methods</b>	<p>Steaming, stir-frying, frying and boiling. Traditional Chinese food may have additional oil added during cooking. Oven use may increase in Australia. Cooking in ovens is uncommon in China.</p>
<b>Shopping/meal preparation</b>	<p>Shopping and meal preparation may vary within each household and between families. The older members of the family are usually responsible for shopping and meal preparation (mother, father, grandmother and grandfather).</p>
<b>Food in pregnancy</b>	<p>Pregnant women are encouraged to continue to work up to the end of pregnancy as it is believed to ensure an easier birth. Some mothers are superstitious and will adhere to a strict diet during pregnancy, which means the exclusion of a number of different foods; e.g. watermelon is considered too 'cold', lychee is considered too 'hot', and crab and pawpaw are thought to cause birth defects. Pregnant women avoid 'cold' and raw foods.</p>
<b>Breastfeeding and first foods</b>	<p>After the birth, mother and baby may observe a period of confinement, refrain from eating 'cold' foods and have to be kept warm. They are usually cared for by the mother-in-law.</p> <p><b>Breastfeeding:</b> There is limited information regarding breastfeeding rates of Chinese women in Australia. In 2006, of 282 Chinese who gave birth in Queensland Health facilities, 68% exclusively breastfed, 24% breastfed and formula-fed and 8% exclusively formula-fed.<sup>15</sup></p> <p>In China, colostrum is often discarded and breastfeeding may not begin until milk has come in. Approximately 98% of infants are breastfed at some time, and 59.4% of mothers initiate breastfeeding early (within one hour of birth). Rates of exclusive breastfeeding at six months and continued breastfeeding at one and two years of age are low.<sup>16</sup> Mothers tend to supplement babies with formula after a few months, as chubby babies are considered strong and healthy.</p> <p><b>Introduction of solids:</b> Some common first foods that babies are fed include rice porridge, stewed fruit, mashed meat and vegetables, and infant rice cereal fortified with a range of vitamins and minerals (e.g. <i>Nestum Infant Cereal</i>).</p>

## 6. Working with Chinese community members

<b>Using an interpreter</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask Chinese community members or groups if they would prefer (or benefit from) having an interpreter present (rather than asking if they speak English).</li> <li>• Be sure to confirm the language preference of the individual or group. This is important because many distinct dialects are spoken.</li> <li>• It is important that a trained and registered interpreter be used when required. The use of children, other family members or friends is not advisable. Health and other services must consider the potential legal consequences of adverse outcomes when using unaccredited people to 'interpret' if an accredited interpreter is available.</li> <li>• If you have limited experience working with an interpreter, it is recommended that you improve these skills prior to meeting with community members. There are many online orientation courses available, and Queensland Health has produced guidelines (<a href="#">available here</a>) for working with interpreters.</li> </ul>
<b>Literacy levels</b>	<p>Within China, literacy rates are very high, with only 4% of the population reported as being illiterate.<sup>6</sup> Literacy rates of Chinese migrants vary, with skilled migrants requiring literacy in English to enter Australia. This is not a requirement of business migrants.</p>
<b>Be aware that ...</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family is the core of Chinese culture. Community members, especially females, may prefer to bring a relative or friend to an appointment or group activity.</li> <li>• Intergenerational differences exist, with older Chinese migrants often preferring printed materials while younger people may prefer web-based information and activities.</li> </ul>
<b>Motivating factors for a healthy lifestyle</b>	<p>Many Chinese people are motivated to live a healthy lifestyle for their individual wellbeing, the prevention of illness, weight maintenance and to live longer. The Chinese belief in the importance of family may also be a major motivator for staying healthy.</p>
<b>Communication style</b>	<p>Depending on the topic, older people may prefer group interactions to meeting with health workers individually.</p>
<b>Health beliefs</b>	<p>Health beliefs of people with a Chinese background who were born in Australia may be similar to Australians. Some Chinese people will use Chinese medical treatments including Chinese herbs, acupuncture and acupressure. Due to the reliance on family members when ill and because main meals are commonly shared, it may be necessary to make dietary recommendations suitable for the whole family.</p> <p>Many Chinese people consider health to mean a state of harmony between the forces of Yin (negative energy, cold) and Yang (positive energy, hot). Illness is perceived to be a result of disharmony or imbalance between these forces, and interventions seek to correct imbalances and restore harmony.<sup>17</sup></p> <p>Food, illness and medications are classified as 'hot' or 'cold' according to the effects on the body, not their temperature or taste.<sup>18</sup> Chinese people may find it difficult to modify their diet if the recommendations clash with hot (heating, warming) and cold (cooling) food beliefs.</p>

## 6. Working with Chinese community members – *continued*

### Health beliefs – *continued*

#### Hot (heating, warming) and cold (cooling) foods

Foods are either hot (warming), cold (cooling) or neutral (no effect). It is common for Chinese people to avoid consumption of too many hot foods or too many cold foods at the same time. Neutral foods are neither hot nor cold and are suitable for anybody.

Warming foods	Cooling foods	Neutral foods
Cherries	Apple	Grapes
Lychee	Banana	Plums
Mango	Grapefruit	Pawpaw
Peach	Orange	Pineapple
Glutinous rice	Lemon	White rice
Butter	Tofu	Cow's milk
Onion	Soy bean	Olives
Pumpkin	Green tea	Potato
Squash	Lettuce	Corn
Chicken	Tomato	Carrot
Ham	Cucumber	Fish
Prawns	Green leafy vegetables	Beef
Lamb	Eggplant	Pork

### Additional resources

- Queensland Health *Working with Interpreters: Guidelines* ([http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/interpreters/guidelines\\_int.pdf](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/interpreters/guidelines_int.pdf))
- To find out more about multicultural health, Queensland Health's Multicultural Health page has information for the public and for health workers, including the *Multicultural health framework*. Go to <http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/default.asp>
- To source or contact an interpreter, please visit [http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/interpreters/QHIS\\_work.asp](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/interpreters/QHIS_work.asp)

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