This resource provides information about the food and food practices of Fiji Indian people settled in Queensland, 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 selection on culturally appropriate ways to approach this.

1. Traditional greetings and etiquette

The Fiji Indian community is diverse in terms of religion and languages spoken. Many of their greetings have religious origins and prescribed responses between people of the same faith. When working with community members, it is important to identify their religious background and ask them about their preferences regarding greetings and the appropriate response when greeted by community members.

It is important to remove your shoes at the door when entering a community member’s home. If an unannounced guest turns up, they are welcomed and fed even if the guest says “no”. Saying “no” is considered the polite thing to do; however, it is seen as rude not to eat the food.

A pat on the shoulder while greeting is common amongst men. Women may hug each other. In formal settings, formal greetings are used.
2. Cultural information and migration history

| Ethnicity | Fiji Indian people are very diverse in language, religion and culture. Fiji Indians trace their ancestry largely to indentured labourers who were taken to Fiji by the British between 1879 and 1916 to work on Fiji's sugarcane plantations. There were also later arrivals of Gujarati and Punjabi migrants. Although many Fiji Indian people adapted to the Fijian environment with changes to dress, language and diet, they maintained a distinct culture. In particular, the Fiji Indian community maintained their religious and spiritual beliefs and practices. Some of the Indian health beliefs and traditions, such as Ayurveda, are helpful in understanding Fiji Indian health beliefs and behaviours. |
| Religion | The Fiji Indian population largely practices Hinduism (77%), followed by Islam (Sunni or other Muslim) (16%), Christianity (6%) and Sikh (1%). |
| Language | Most Fiji Indian community members speak English and Fiji Hindi. |
| Migration history | In 1987, military coups in Fiji caused concern amongst the Fiji Indians. In 1990, a new constitution was created, which guaranteed indigenous Fijian political control. This led to many Fiji Indians migrating to Australia and New Zealand. In 1987–88 the number of settler arrivals reached a peak of 2,980, and by 2001 the Fiji-born population in Australia had increased to 44,040. Since then, many more Fiji Indians have chosen to migrate to Australia or New Zealand for work and education opportunities, with this trend still continuing. A significant number of Fiji Indian families move to New Zealand prior to moving to Australia. In the Australian context, it is important to consider the unique migration groups of this population, including the Fiji-born Fiji Indian community and the Australia-born Fiji Indian community. Language and cultural practices may vary between these groups due to acculturation. |
| Gender roles | Gender roles in the Fiji Indian community are strongly influenced by culture and religious affiliation. Women are commonly responsible for home duties, while men are often expected to be the ‘bread winners’ of their families. However, with increased prioritisation of wealth acquisition, many of the cultural norms and gender roles are becoming more relaxed as women seek work outside the home. |
| Household size | Extended families are common, and may include mother, father, children and grandparents. In Fiji, during the indentured-labouring period, families included many children; however, family sizes have since become smaller. |

3. Health profile in Australia

| Life expectancy | The life expectancy in Fiji is 70.1 years (67.2 years for males and 73.2 years for females). The life expectancy for Australians is 82.3 years (80.4 years for males and 84.5 years for females). There is currently no reliable data for Fiji Indian life expectancy in Australia. (Please note that the above life expectancy data are combined for all Fiji-born migrants, not just Fiji Indian migrants.) |
| New arrivals | At the 2011 Census, 66.3% of the Fiji-born population in Australia arrived in Australia prior to 2001, 16.6% arrived between 2001 and 2006, and 13.4% arrived between 2007 and 2011. (Please note that these data relate to all Fiji-born migrants, not just Fiji Indian migrants.) |
3. Health profile in Australia – continued

Chronic diseases

Chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes are a significant burden on the Fiji Indian community. For July 2006–June 2008, the Queensland standardised hospital separation rate for coronary heart disease in the Fiji-born population was more than double the rate for all Queenslanders. There was no difference in the standardised separation rates for diabetes; however, the rate of diabetes complications was double that experienced by all Queenslanders. (Please note that these data relate to all Fiji-born migrants, not just Fiji Indian migrants.)

The community reports that there exists a common cultural perspective that “I am going to die anyway, so I might as well enjoy the ride” (“kaho pio mauj karo”). There is therefore a strong reluctance to seek support and engage with health services.

The burden of chronic disease is high and the level of engagement with the health system, particularly preventive health, is low. The Fiji Indian community reports high prioritisation of employment, education and wealth acquisition. Prioritisation of health generally occurs at much later stages of disease progression, and is likely influenced by the mindset that people must only observe healthy lifestyles over the age of 50; or that until a health problem exists, no precautions are necessary.

Oral health

Water in Fiji is fluoridated and generally good oral health and dental hygiene practices exist. Tongue cleaning is encouraged and is a common cultural practice of Fiji Indian people.

Social determinants of health

Income: Fijian migrants in Queensland tend to be represented in the middle-income bracket. The median individual weekly income for a Fiji-born person working in Australia in 2011 was $699, compared to $538 for all overseas-born and $597 for all Australia-born people.

Employment: The participation rate of Fiji-born people in the Australian-based labour force was 73% in 2011, with the unemployment rate at 7%. The corresponding rates in the total Australian population were 65% and 6%, respectively.

Of the Fiji-born population who were employed in Australia in 2011, 47% were employed in a skilled managerial, professional or trade occupation.

Community reports indicate that Fiji Indian migrants often take up extra employment to earn an income sufficient to provide for their families. It is not uncommon for Fiji Indian people to have a second job such as cleaning or driving. Many Fiji Indian community members may attain employment outside of their skilled/qualified area due to lack of employment options in Australia, or inability to convert their studies or previous professional experience into practice in Australia.

Education: The 2011 Census reported that 61% of the Fiji-born community in Australia had some form of higher non-school qualification (compared to 56% of the Australian population). Of the Fiji-born community aged 15 years and over, 6% were still attending an educational institution (compared to 9% of the total Australian population). (Please note that the above statistics for income, employment and education are for all Fiji-born migrants, not just Fiji Indians.)

4. Traditional food and food practices

Breakfast

A typical Fiji Indian breakfast may include:
- tea brewed with or without milk
- bread with butter and/or various spreads, including jams and honey
- cabin crackers (similar to Sao biscuits)
- fruit.

Main and other meals

Roti or rice is preferred at most main meals. There is a preference for people of Northern Indian descent to prefer roti, and people of Southern Indian descent to prefer rice; however, variations can occur.
4. Traditional food and food practices – continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fruit and vegetables</th>
<th>Common fruit and vegetables include bitter gourd, okra/bhindi, loofah/luffa (a type of squash similar to a cucumber), jackfruit, star apple, custard apple, pawpaw, mango and pineapple.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Snacks</td>
<td><em>Bhuja</em> (a spicy mix of dried peas, nuts, sultanas, dried fried noodles, and chips made from various legumes), <em>bara</em> (pronounced ‘bar-aa’ and similar to falafels), <em>samosa</em>, <em>bhajiya/pakori</em> and Indian sweets.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Beverages            | Common beverages include:  
  * tea and coffee, most often with milk  
  * laal cha (a weak black tea, drunk with sugar)  
  * lemongrass tea  
  * sharbat (a drink made from fresh lime/lemon juice and raw sugar). |
| Celebration foods and religious food practices | There are many cultural, social and religious celebrations acknowledged by the Fiji Indian community. It is common for these celebrations to be accompanied by food. Meat dishes such as goat curry or goat *palau*, duck curry and fish curry are common. Traditionally, these dishes were reserved for guests but are becoming a common part of the diet.  
  Fiji Indian people of Hindu faith:  
  * generally do not eat beef and some may not eat pork  
  * do not eat meat on various days of the week. Families observe a ritual purification through not eating meat (including eggs). The day of the week varies significantly between families; however, some common days are Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday.  
  * ensure that *Prasad* (food offered in a prayer ceremony) is eaten and not thrown away, as it is considered holy or blessed.  
  Fiji Indian people practising Islam:  
  * will not eat pork  
  * will eat halal meats that are prepared using specific methods. |

**Common traditional foods**

*Dalol* is a root crop also known as taro.  
Fiji Indian families have adopted this traditional Indigenous Fijian root crop in their diets. It tends to be curried with coconut milk or boiled, and is a staple for many families.

*Khitchri*, made from rice, lentils and spices boiled together.  
This dish is eaten as a gruel and is often eaten when people are sick or fasting, or as part of a detox diet. It is often served with raw tomato and onion, accompanied by chutney and yoghurt.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common traditional foods – continued</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kheer</strong> (milky rice pudding), made by boiling rice in milk and sugar. It can be flavoured with cardamom, raisins, saffron and/or nuts (e.g. pistachios, almonds or cashews).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Halwa</strong> (semolina pudding), made from semolina, ghee, milk and sugar. It may be flavoured with cardamom, sultanas and nuts (e.g. cashews).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep-fried snacks, e.g.:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- <strong>Bara</strong> (top), a deep-fried dumpling made from garlic, onion, chillies, baking powder and spices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- <strong>Bhajiya/Pakora</strong> (bottom), made by deep-frying vegetables dipped in a batter of besan (chickpea) flour with spices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian sweets (e.g. <em>gulab jamun</em>, red <em>jalebi</em>, and <em>burfi/barfi</em>). Common ingredients include milk powder, ghee, chickpea/wheat flour, and sweet syrups. Cardamom is a commonly used spice in Indian sweets.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Roti</strong>, made from whole-wheat flour (<em>atta</em>), water and salt, and cooked on a hot, oiled or buttered hotplate or in a frying pan.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Common traditional foods – continued**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dish Description</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prawn curry, made from fresh prawns, onions, garlic, tomato, chilli, spices and</td>
<td>Fiji Indian people have incorporated a great deal of seafood into their diet, and prawn curry is a favourite of many families. It is served with rice or roti.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>salt, and topped with coriander.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicken curry, made from chicken pieces (often wings and other cheap cuts),</td>
<td>This curry is often eaten with two carbohydrate sources: rice and roti.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>onions, garlic, chilli, spices and salt, and topped with fresh coriander.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lemon juice may be added.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamb curry, made from cubed lamb, onions, garlic, tomato, chilli, spices and</td>
<td>This is a unique Fiji Indian dish. Because boneless lamb is scarce and expensive in Fiji, lamb shoulder chops or lamb shanks are used. It is served with rice or roti.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>salt. Potatoes may be included.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuna curry, made from tinned tuna (or mackerel), onions, garlic, tomato, chilli,</td>
<td>This is an everyday meal that is cheap, easy and quick to prepare. It is served with rice or roti.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spices and salt. Potatoes may be included.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aloo baigan (potato and eggplant curry), made from potato, eggplant, tomatoes,</td>
<td>Seen here served with puri (fried bread), aloo baigan is often eaten at weddings but is now common in many households.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>onion, garlic, spices and salt.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Common traditional foods – continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dish Description</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fried fish, made from fresh fish coated with a mix of spices and cooked in oil.</td>
<td>Fried fish is eaten with <em>dhal</em> and rice, or as an appetiser.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Dhal</em> and rice, made from split peas, onion, garlic, spices and salt, and may be topped with fresh coriander.</td>
<td><em>Dhal</em> and rice is a staple meal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackfruit curry, made from young/unripe jackfruit, garlic, spices and salt, and cooked in oil.</td>
<td>Jackfruit is a popular tropical fruit, as it is readily available in Fiji. It can also be found in some Asian markets in Australia. Jackfruit is generally eaten with <em>roti</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Bhindi</em> curry/Fried <em>bhindi</em>, made with <em>bhindi</em>/okra, onions, fresh chillies, garlic, spices, salt and oil.</td>
<td>This curry is eaten by people of all ages and ethnicities in Fiji. It is usually eaten with <em>roti</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tinned mutton curry, made from canned mutton, potatoes, onion, garlic, spices, oil and salt. Coriander may be used as a garnish, and whole fresh tomatoes and ginger may also be added.</td>
<td>This is a common dish which can be made as a dry curry or a thick soup. It is eaten with rice or <em>roti</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamb stew, made from lamb chops, potatoes, carrots, tomatoes, onions, garlic, soy sauce and ginger. Chillies, coriander and salt may be added.</td>
<td>Bones are an essential ingredient, and other root vegetables may be substituted for potato (e.g. cassava or taro). Lamb stew may be served with rice and/or boiled taro or cassava.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Food habits in Australia

### Food practices

Washing hands before eating is essential. Fiji Indian people use their right hand to eat. Eating is a communal and family affair.

### Meal patterns

Three meals are generally eaten, dinner being the main meal for most Fiji Indians. Breakfast tends to be a smaller meal (e.g. toast, cereal, porridge or fruit), with a hot breakfast on weekends.

### Adaptations to diet in Australia

Traditional Fiji Indian diets are largely vegetable based, and consumption of processed foods is minimal. In Australia, however, Fiji Indians consume more meat and processed food due to ease of availability. Vegetables that are readily available in Australia have also been adopted as part of the Fiji Indian diet.

### Substitute foods

Most traditional foods are available in urban areas in supermarkets, local markets, and Indian and Asian grocers. Some substitutions have occurred from whole foods to processed foods, e.g. coconut milk to canned coconut milk/cream.

Australia-born Fiji Indians often prefer white flour rather than wholemeal flour when making roti.

### Cooking methods

Cooking methods include currying, stewing, deep-frying, stir-frying and cooking in a lovo (an underground oven).

### Shopping/meal preparation

It remains traditional to eat large quantities of vegetables, but migration to Australia has seen an increase in the amount and type of meat consumed. Celebratory foods such as sweets, which usually were prepared during festivals, are now prepared out of festival time and eaten as treats.

### Food in pregnancy

Mothers are usually not denied any food requests that result from cravings. This stems from the belief that if the expectant mother is left wanting (because she was denied her cravings), her baby will drool excessively.

### Breastfeeding and first foods

Traditionally, postnatal practices involve a mother being cared for by her female family members (especially her mother) and provided with three freshly cooked meals per day. In Australia, immigration has separated many families. In these cases, Fiji Indian new mothers may not receive the same degree of family support.

Postnatal and breastfeeding foods are freshly prepared and cooked, and recommended foods are warm in temperature, have the consistency of soup, and are easy to digest. A special rejuvenation diet is observed to assist in strengthening the mother’s body and is accompanied by oil massages for both mother and infant. Meals are not recommended within 30 minutes before or after massages.

A special rejuvenation milk is given to the new mother for breakfast. It is a decoction (a concentrated liquor resulting from heating or boiling a substance) of spices in a small amount of water. Milk is added or the drink can be made solely on milk. How it is made will depend on the needs and preferences of the individual mother. If the mother is particularly undernourished and unable to eat, the drink is made solely on milk; in other circumstances, it may be diluted with water. Some of the spices used are dry ginger, turmeric, cardamom, nutmeg and black pepper. (If the mother is experiencing bloating, flatulence and/or constipation, different spices are used.) This drink is often served with ghee (clarified butter), depending on the requirements of the mother.

6. Working with Fiji Indian community members

### Using an interpreter

Ask Fiji Indian community members whether they would prefer or benefit from having an interpreter present rather than asking if they speak English.

Elder Fiji Indian community members may need the assistance of an interpreter.

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.

If you have limited experience working with an interpreter, it is recommended that you improve these skills prior to meeting community members. There are many online orientation courses available, and Queensland Health has produced guidelines (available here) for working with interpreters.
6. Working with Fiji Indian community members – continued

**Literacy levels**

In Fiji, literacy levels are generally high, with 93% of Fijian adults (aged 15 to 24) reading-literate and 99% writing-literate. Currently, no data exist to ascertain the literacy levels of the Fiji Indian community in Australia; however, community reports indicate that elders may need language assistance.

**Be aware that . . .**

A Fiji Indian community member may have a different perception of time. Being late for an appointment, event or meeting does not indicate that the activity is perceived as unimportant. Be aware of this when planning community events or appointments.

Elders might say “yes” to questions or statements, despite not understanding. This is done out of fear, politeness or possible communication barriers.

Religious and family values impact on decision making related to food and health.

**Motivating factors for a healthy lifestyle**

Often the motivation to engage in health services is low, unless something negative has occurred. Education, employment and home ownership are often prioritised.

Fiji Indian families tend to care for their elders for as long as they can, so not being a burden on the family may be a motivation for keeping well.

**Communication style**

When communicating with Fiji Indians it is important to:

- be relaxed and friendly, while maintaining formality
- speak slowly in a conversational style
- maintain eye contact, but avoid staring.

It would be culturally appropriate to have a female practitioner speak about female health.

**Health beliefs**

It is common for Fiji Indian people to have a casual attitude towards health and to prioritise health at later stages of disease progression.

References


6. Azusa Pacific University. A Land of My Own. A study of Indian families in the Fiji Islands (Undergraduate). Azusa Pacific University [Internet]; 2010 [cited May 2017]. Available from: [http://www.academia.edu/1315453/A_Land_of_My_Own_A_Study_on_Indian_Families_in_the_Fiji_Islands](http://www.academia.edu/1315453/A_Land_of_My_Own_A_Study_on_Indian_Families_in_the_Fiji_Islands)


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References – continued


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Project partners

This resource was developed by staff of the Good Start Program, Children’s Health Queensland; and the Access & Capacity-building Team, Metro South Health.

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