

- Longevity

# Why the Okinawa diet holds the key to a longer, better life

## Low calorie-fat diet is key to longer, better life

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Some people age backwards. The rest of us, struggle to remember where we left our keys. That's the magic of Okinawa, Japan, the land of centenarians, where people seem to breeze through their 90s. But their secret to living longer, healthier lives isn't locked away in some magical elixir, it's in their food.

Perhaps the most fascinating principle is Hara Hachi Bu, a Confucian teaching that encourages eating until you're only 80 per cent full. This subtle habit of portion control without restriction is believed to be one of the biggest contributors to Okinawan longevity.

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In a world chasing youth and health through shortcuts, the Okinawan model reminds us: the real recipe for longevity is slow-cooked — and savoured.



From vibrant purple sweet potatoes to antioxidant-packed teas and a clever little habit of stopping meals before you're full (yes, before), the Okinawa diet has captured the attention of doctors, nutritionists, and longevity chasers all over the world. But what exactly do Okinawans eat, and can their time-tested approach to food actually help the rest of us live longer, too?

Let's dig in.

### WHAT IS THE OKINAWA DIET?

Unlike the typical Western diet or even the modern Japanese one, the Okinawa diet is built on moderation, seasonal produce, and simplicity. Meals are centred on locally available vegetables, legumes, and grains, with meat, dairy, and fish consumed in very small quantities, more for flavour than as main ingredients.

Dr Yasir Shafi, a homeopathy practitioner at Wellth, notes: "The Okinawa diet is a beautiful example of food as medicine. It prioritises ingredients that have anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties, like turmeric and bitter melon, and is deeply rooted in balance and mindfulness."

Indeed, the core components of the Okinawa diet include:

- Vegetables, especially sweet potatoes, bitter melon (goya), seaweed, and dark leafy greens
- Whole grains, such as millet and brown rice
- Soy-based foods, including tofu, miso, and natto
- Fruits, especially tropical ones like papaya and citrus
- Herbs and spices, such as turmeric and mugwort
- Teas, particularly green or jasmine varieties

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#### HOW DOES ONE FOLLOW THE OKINAWA DIET TODAY?

Adopting this way of eating doesn't require a passport to Japan. It's remarkably adaptable, even in modern kitchens.

A few easy steps to get started:

- Make vegetables the star of your plate, aim for colour and variety
- Limit meat and dairy, and use them more like garnishes
- Swap out refined grains for whole grains like millet and brown rice
- Add soy foods like tofu, miso, and edamame
- Flavour with turmeric, mugwort, and ginger rather than heavy sauces Ditch processed food and sugar as much as possible
- Sip on antioxidant-rich teas

It's not just about what Okinawans eat, it's how they eat. Their meals are unhurried, communal, and celebratory. This lowers stress and aids digestion.

#### WHAT NEW STUDIES SAY

In a 2023 Swedish clinical trial, adults with Type 2 diabetes followed a Nordic spin on the Okinawa diet for just 12 weeks — and the results were remarkable. Researchers observed major improvements in gut microbiota diversity, blood sugar control, cholesterol levels, and overall metabolic health. Even more impressively, a second study published in *BMC Oral Health* (2023) found that the same diet, when followed for just 30 days, significantly reduced blood pressure, body weight, gum inflammation, and inflammatory cytokines — outperforming the standard diabetic diet on multiple fronts

Dr Giovanni Leonetti, General Surgeon at Cornerstone Clinic, provides insight into the macronutrient breakdown of the traditional Okinawan diet: “The Okinawan diet is low in calories and fat, moderate in protein, and high in fibre and complex carbohydrates.”

“There's no set calorie limit or meal timing,” Dr Leonetti explains. “Instead, portion control and mindful eating take precedence.”

#### LONGEVITY, BACKED BY SCIENCE

Why is the Okinawa diet so closely linked to long life? According to Dr Leonetti: “The longevity benefits of the Okinawa diet are mainly attributed to its abundance of whole foods rich in vitamins, minerals, and powerful antioxidants.”

These antioxidants combat oxidative stress, a major contributor to ageing and chronic illnesses like diabetes, cancer, and heart disease. Narjesene Rasheed, Expert Dietitian and Nutritionist at

Kaya Wellness and Longevity Clinics, adds: “Okinawans live well into their 90s and 100s with fewer cases of heart disease, diabetes, and neurodegenerative conditions. Their meals support metabolic health, reduce inflammation, and regulate body weight.” This is not just folklore, research from the Okinawa Centenarian Study and other scientific bodies shows, lower rates of cardiovascular disease and cancer, slower cognitive decline, healthy weight maintenance, reduced inflammation and resilience in old age.

#### BUSTING THE MYTHS

Despite its reputation, the Okinawa diet isn't entirely vegetarian or a miracle cure. “While Okinawans prioritise plant-based foods, they do consume meat and fish in moderation,” Dr Leonetti clarifies. “And longevity is not about diet alone — factors like physical activity, social ties, and purpose (‘ikigai’) play huge roles too.”

#### MODERN-DAY CHALLENGES

Unfortunately, Okinawa is also an example of what happens when traditional diets are abandoned. In recent years, younger generations adopting Western food habits have seen spikes in obesity and chronic disease. “Preserving traditional food practices isn't about nostalgia, it's a health imperative,” says Rasheed.

#### SHOULD YOU TRY THE OKINAWA DIET?

This is not a prescriptive, rigid plan, it's a flexible philosophy. The Okinawa diet can inspire anyone looking to, eat more plants, reduce processed food intake, embrace mindful, intuitive eating and prioritise health and longevity over diet trends. “The Okinawan way reminds us that longevity isn't about hacks or superfoods — it's about consistency, simplicity, and joy,” says Dr Shafi. The Okinawa diet is less of a menu and more of a mindset, one that celebrates natural food, slow living, and social connection. It's proof that the path to long life may not lie in the latest supplement or trending cleanse, but in what your grandparents might call common sense: Eat mostly plants, share your meals, listen to your body, and don't forget to enjoy the moment.

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