

Sri Lankan Food

Sri Lankans, being South Asians, are at a greater risk of metabolic syndrome with a smaller increase of their weight compared to Europeans. Sri Lankan migrants in New Zealand are found to be at a higher risk of developing diabetes and cardiovascular diseases when compared to the New Zealand European population. Changes in their dietary patterns coupled with lack of exercise contribute largely to these high rates. This article helps health providers in New Zealand understand the Sri Lankan dietary pattern, cooking methods, and gives solutions to overcome barriers to change.

Facts about Food in Sri Lanka

- ☺ Like New Zealand, Sri Lanka is an island resulting in a wide range of food sources available
- ☺ Most food is produced locally
- ☺ Rice is the staple food which is grown and available throughout the island
- ☺ Rice for consumption is either cultivated in private paddy fields or bought from the market
- ☺ Vegetables are commercially produced within the country
- ☺ Household gardening is encouraged to increase the availability of fresh vegetables
- ☺ There is an abundance of tropical fruits are grown in most gardens
- ☺ Being a country surrounded by the Indian Ocean a large variety of fish are available
- ☺ Chicken is the main meat, while other meats are consumed in lesser amounts
- ☺ Sugar is commonly taken with tea and sugar added sweets are consumed frequently

A Typical Sri Lankan Meal Pattern

- ☺ Early morning tea with milk and sugar
- ☺ Three main meals with one or two snacks during the day
- ☺ Main meal is served as one course
- ☺ Whether the whole family eats together or not varies from house to house
- ☺ Tea or coffee is taken in between meals with a snack

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Thanks to Dr. Samantha Weerasekara from Sri Lanka for providing the content for this article. Samantha worked as a medical doctor in the Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka for 16 years. Samantha achieved a Post Graduate master's degree in Human Nutrition and was employed as a medical officer in nutrition at a tertiary care hospital in Sri Lanka. She is visiting New Zealand for one year and has enjoyed volunteering at Activity and Nutrition Aotearoa (ANA).



Composition of Meals

| Carbohydrates | Proteins | Vegetables | Fruits | Fats |
|---|--|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ This is the main food item in a meal ☞ Most of the time, portions are higher than recommended ☞ Mainly rice based (at least one meal per day), with varying types of rice; polished or red rice (with bran), small or large grain rice, raw or parboiled rice ☞ Other starchy foods taken as main food item are bread, roti, noodles made from rice flour (string hoppers or hoppers), or noodles, pasta, cassava (manioc), jack fruit and bread fruit ☞ Boiled pulses like mung bean (green gram), chickpeas and black-eyed peas (cowpea) also make a main meal ☞ Milk rice cooked by adding coconut milk, salt and sometimes chillies and onion paste is a Sri Lankan favourite and is served for special occasions ☞ Most foods are made with wheat or rice flour; white wheat flour is used rather than wholemeal | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ Usually chicken, fish, eggs, sardines, dry-fish, sprats or lentils ☞ Protein foods are eaten in smaller portions with rice ☞ Frequency of protein foods taken differs according to the household economy with higher income families being able to afford more protein | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ Types and number of vegetables vary depending on the time of the year as seasonal vegetables are the main source of vegetables ☞ Higher income families will have access to a greater choice ☞ Carbohydrate rich jackfruit, bread-fruit, and seasonally available yams are also consumed as vegetables as well as rice ☞ A huge number of green leaves are available in most gardens and consumed commonly with rice however these greens are not commonly available in New Zealand ☞ Vegetables are usually eaten cooked, using coconut milk ☞ Raw vegetables as salads are less popular | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ Huge varieties of tropical fruits are available, mostly grown in the home gardens ☞ Fruits are usually eaten as a dessert rather than as a snack ☞ Fresh fruits are preferred by Sri Lankans rather than dried, frozen or canned fruits | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞ Most meals are cooked using coconut oil, which is high in saturated fat ☞ All curries are cooked using coconut milk ☞ Sunflower, canola, palm, vegetable and sesame oil are also used ☞ Margarine is eaten more than butter ☞ Full fat milk is preferred by many Sri Lankans ☞ Peanut and cashew nuts are available although cashew is more expensive |

Examples of meals Samanthika has cooked using ingredients available in New Zealand



Cooking Methods

- ☺ Rice is always eaten boiled
- ☺ Deep or shallow frying is done using coconut oil
- ☺ Green leaves are eaten as salads or cooked with scraped coconut
- ☺ Longer cooking times are more common
- ☺ Baking, roasting or grilling are not common cooking methods
- ☺ Vegetables are cooked with coconut milk, spices, red chilli, curry leaves and saffron
- ☺ More than 60 spices are used with red chilli, dried turmeric, black pepper and garlic the most common

Sri Lankan Migrants in New Zealand:

- ☺ Are less likely to meet the recommended number of servings of vegetables and fruits
- ☺ Consume less vegetables than in Sri Lanka due to lack of availability and variety of known vegetables
- ☺ Find access to quality spices and condiments problematic
- ☺ Are attracted to new, tasty foods high in fat, sugar and salt
- ☺ Are changing their cooking methods, e.g. powdered or canned coconut milk is replacing fresh coconut milk

Making Sri Lankan Meals Healthy in New Zealand

- ☺ Consider the carbohydrate portion of the main meal, which might need to be reduced
- ☺ Encourage the available vegetables in a variety of cooking methods and in combinations
- ☺ Encourage vegetable salads
- ☺ Promote reduced fat milk
- ☺ Encourage a variety of nuts
- ☺ Discourage deep frying, rather do shallow frying using non-stick pan with little oil
- ☺ Encourage the use of lower fat cooking methods like steaming
- ☺ Encourage reduced sugar with hot drinks or use a sugar replacement
- ☺ Encourage more fruits either fresh or frozen
- ☺ Encourage wholemeal, whole grain products