Bienvenidos a Cuba!

Introduction

- In 2013, it was estimated that there were more than 2 million Hispanic people of Cuban origin residing in the United States—that's twice as many as the population in the 1980s and the numbers continue to grow. In the Hispanic community, the health concerns are much the same as the United States population at large; heart disease and cancer are the leading causes of death. Both disease conditions can be largely influenced by diet and lifestyle, however, access to healthcare resources is limited in this population. According to the CDC, only 22.7% of Hispanic Americans are insured. So when a registered dietitian encounters a person of Cuban origin, cultural sensitivity will play a large role in how well the patient perceives the education provided.

Health Beliefs and Practices

- Cuban-Americans, along with the majority of Hispanic Americans, do not typically associate dietary patterns and health risks. Therefore, patients from this population may require more motivation to learn and implement healthy dietary changes than other populations. Their cultural beliefs also heavily influence the way they view health and illness.

- For instance, Cuban-Americans may believe that a disease state results from a “humoral imbalance”; that is, an imbalance between a person and the environment. These conditions fall into different categories, such as “hot and wet” or “cold and dry.” In order to treat them, patients may enlist foods or spices that present the opposite quality of the illness—e.g., hot foods for cold conditions. Keep in mind that Cuban-Americans and the Hispanic community at large rely on a combination of both their own traditional medicine and Western medicine when it comes to healthcare, so practitioners will be more successful if they allow for both in an intervention.

Traditional Meal Patterns

- Historically, Cuban dietary preferences have been interwoven with the political climate. Food and energy resources declined worldwide in 1989, which led to a Cubans reportedly decreasing their caloric intake from approximately 2900 calories in 1988 to roughly 1860 calories in 1993. Though slight economic recovery has occurred, Cubans are still faced with a high availability of convenience foods (fast food), but unpredictable availability of fruits and vegetables. Healthy foods also tend to cost more. Therefore, preferred foods include red meat, ham, bread, and soft drinks.

- Although staples in a more traditional Cuban diet include a balance of foods such as rice, beans, chicken, pork, bananas, and yuca, recently, more refined sugar appears in the diet. This is largely due to a preference for sugar-sweetened beverages, perhaps as a result of the higher availability of fast foods. Contemporary Cuban culinary patterns include many fried foods, animal protein (red meat over white), excess dairy consumption, and high sodium intake. According to self-reports, Cubans spend the most on animal products and the least on vegetables. Thus, only 17% of Cubans consume the recommended servings of vegetables per day.
Traditional Meals

- In Cuba, the ham and cheese sandwich reigns supreme. According to the 2nd National Survey on Risk Factors and Chronic Diseases (2001), 90% of Cubans would eat ham once a day, and the Cubano sandwich tops the favorite foods list. Traditional Cuban dishes, such as fricase de pollo (chicken stew), pernil asado con mojo (marinated pork shoulder), and Elena Ruz (white bread sandwich with turkey, jam, cream cheese), are heavy in animal protein and refined carbohydrates.

Barriers to Good Nutrition

- Staple diet and food preferences: Traditional Cuban foods are high in animal protein, fat, and refined carbohydrates. These foods are a cultural norm, making it difficult to switch to a healthier diet.
- Lack of nutrition knowledge and education: Perception of nutrition-related health risk is low. According to a survey conducted by the Nutrition and Food Hygiene Institute 90% of the population would eat fried foods at every meal if available.
- Limited access to nutritious foods: 25% of Cubans live in rural areas. The Cuban government controls food security. Nutritious foods are supplied through a subsidized rationing system, which only provides minimum amounts of healthy food options.
- Limited agricultural practices: Cuba’s main agricultural products are sugar-cane, tobacco, citrus, rice, potatoes, beans, and livestock. Actions needed include aggressive training, seed certification, and better distribution/accessibility for healthier and more diverse agricultural products.

Communication Guidelines

- Before a dietitian interacts with a Cuban patient, she must first assess the degree to which the patient understands English. The patient may be scared in the hospital and state that he doesn’t understand the dietitian. To make the patient and family members more comfortable, healthcare providers should offer an interpreter.
- The patriarchal structure of Cuban society means dietitians may have to direct their questions and education to the elder men in the family. Generally, the men are the first to hear important information, and then they pass it down to the women and children. As a sign of respect for a patient’s culture, dietitians should note how how his or her family is structured and honor that structure.
- Many Cubans and Cuban-Americans have a lower education level. As with every patient, dietitians need to figure out the best way to present information to them based on their level of knowledge.
- Hispanic cultures often use the television and radio as their main source of media. This is important to remember if a dietitian is attempting to reach large amounts of people.

Nutrition Counseling Considerations

- When counseling, it’s important that dietitians keep in mind a few key communication guidelines. Before counseling, they should identify if the patient was born in the U.S. or Cuba. This shows respect for the patient and will help healthcare providers to identify a better way of communicating and addressing his needs. It will also build rapport and strengthen communication.
- For many Cubans, coping with a disease is more difficult than even confronting death. Therefore, a stronger emphasis should be placed on preventing a disease through nutrition than preventing death. Many Cubans rely on traditional healing systems due to their culture and the high cost of modern medicine. Dietitians should emphasize nutrition as a cost-effective preventative medicine. Additionally, Cubans are very group-oriented and look to each other for information. Therefore, group education may be beneficial for spreading information to a larger amount of the Cuban or Cuban-American population.
References


Photos


