

# A Nutrition Assessment of Dietary Practices of Mexicans Living in the State of Veracruz, Mexico

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## ABSTRACT

“Cultural diversity is a major issue in American eating. To fully understand the impact cultures play in American nutrition, one must study both food and culture” (Warrix, p. 3). The ebb and flow of immigrants coming into the United States in search of new opportunities or a fresh start has been present since the foundation of the country. The United States has become a melting pot of cultures and traditions. It stands to reason then that traditional diets must undergo a dramatic change upon relocation to a new country. Immigration plays a huge part in the acculturation of foods in the new environment. For example, most traditional foods of a native diet are either missing or not economically affordable. In an effort to identify the traditional foods that make up the Mexican diet, the researcher traveled through the state of Veracruz, Mexico and compiled data describing the types of foods eaten and the frequency of its consumption. 453 questionnaires were collected with the average respondent age of 24.7 years. Demographic characteristics include 178 (39%) of the respondents were male, 257 (57%) were female, and 18 (4%) did not supply gender data. Questionnaires were collected in three communities: Xalapa (n1 = 366), Veracruz (n2 = 45), and Poza Rica (n3 = 42). Comparison against the largest data set (age group: 18-24) was completed to determine changes within different age groups and the different communities. Slight differences in food consumption patterns emerged between different age groups and communities, but the core foods that make up the traditional Mexican diet were still able to be determined.

## INTRODUCTION

Food is inherently shaped by a person's culture. This culture determines the frequency of a certain food being eaten and also food selections. The Mexican and American food cultures are distinct and thrive on the cultural norms and practices of the people living in the country. Because of these differences, many Mexican immigrants who are now living and raising their families in the United States have difficulties maintaining their core diet and nutritional practices they had established in Mexico.

A 2000 census done by the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services discovered that there were 192,921 Hispanics living in Wisconsin with Mexican Americans constituting 66% of this total (pp. 23-25). It is unrealistic to assume that this entire population will completely change their way of eating and nutritional practices because of their physical location in a new country. In order to lessen the impact immigration makes on traditional nutritional practices one must discover the core diet of the Mexican culture and then compare it to the adapted core diet of Mexican Americans. With adequate and appropriate food substitutions taking place, the Mexican American consumer can maintain a healthy and relatively traditional diet while living in a new culture.

## PURPOSE

This study determined the core foods that make up the traditional Mexican diet of Mexicans living in the state of Veracruz, Mexico. The results of this project would then serve as a starting board for future projects to determine the core diet of Mexican Americans and healthy food substitutions that can take place while retaining traditional cultural eating practices.

## METHODS

The researcher gathered data in the state of Veracruz, Mexico for this descriptive study. An analysis of dietary intake using a survey was implemented. The survey was used to determine the staple foods of Mexico based on its consumption frequency. Respondents identified food items and the frequency of its consumption. By determining

the food items that are eaten multiple times per day or on a regular basis, the research was able to determine the typical Mexican diet of Mexicans living in the state of Veracruz. The instrument was approved through the IRB board at UW-La Crosse and informed consent was obtained by respondents.

#### *Participants*

Mexicans aged 18-65 years

**Gender:** 57% Female, 39% Male

**Age categories:** 18-24 years (69%), 25-34 years (14%), 35-44 (6%), 45-54 years (5%), 55-65 years (1%) and no data (5%)

#### *Location*

Three communities throughout the state of Veracruz, Mexico: Xalapa (n1 = 366), Veracruz (n2 = 45), and Poza Rica (n3 = 42).

#### *Data Collection*

The original goal of survey response was (N = 200). Through the multiple cities throughout the state of Veracruz the researcher was able to exceed the original goal of N = 200 and collected 453 surveys (N = 453). Responses at the Universities were the highest, hence the high response rate within the 18-24 year old age bracket. Data was also collected at local businesses (a telephone company and pizza & yogurt shop) as well as in the main city parks and common meeting places.

## **RESULTS**

Over the course of four weeks 453 (N = 453) surveys were collected. Foods that made up the core Mexican diet were identified using the frequency of each food item consumption. For the purpose of this poster the researcher is only reporting the results for 18-24 year olds as 69% (n = 312) of the respondents fit into this age bracket. The frequency of consumption scale was set at 1 = multiple times per day, 2 = daily, 3 = most days, 4 = more than one time per week, 5 = once in a while, and 6 = almost never.

Based on this scale, the most frequently consumed items were (see Figure 1):

- Milk = 2
- Fruit-based water = 2
- Beef or Pork = 3
- Chicken = 3
- Cheese = 3
- Corn Tortillas = 2
- Rice = 3
- Cereal = 2
- Noodles = 2
- Fresh fruit = 2
- Fresh vegetables = 2
- Oil = 2
- Peppers = 2
- Red Salsa = 2

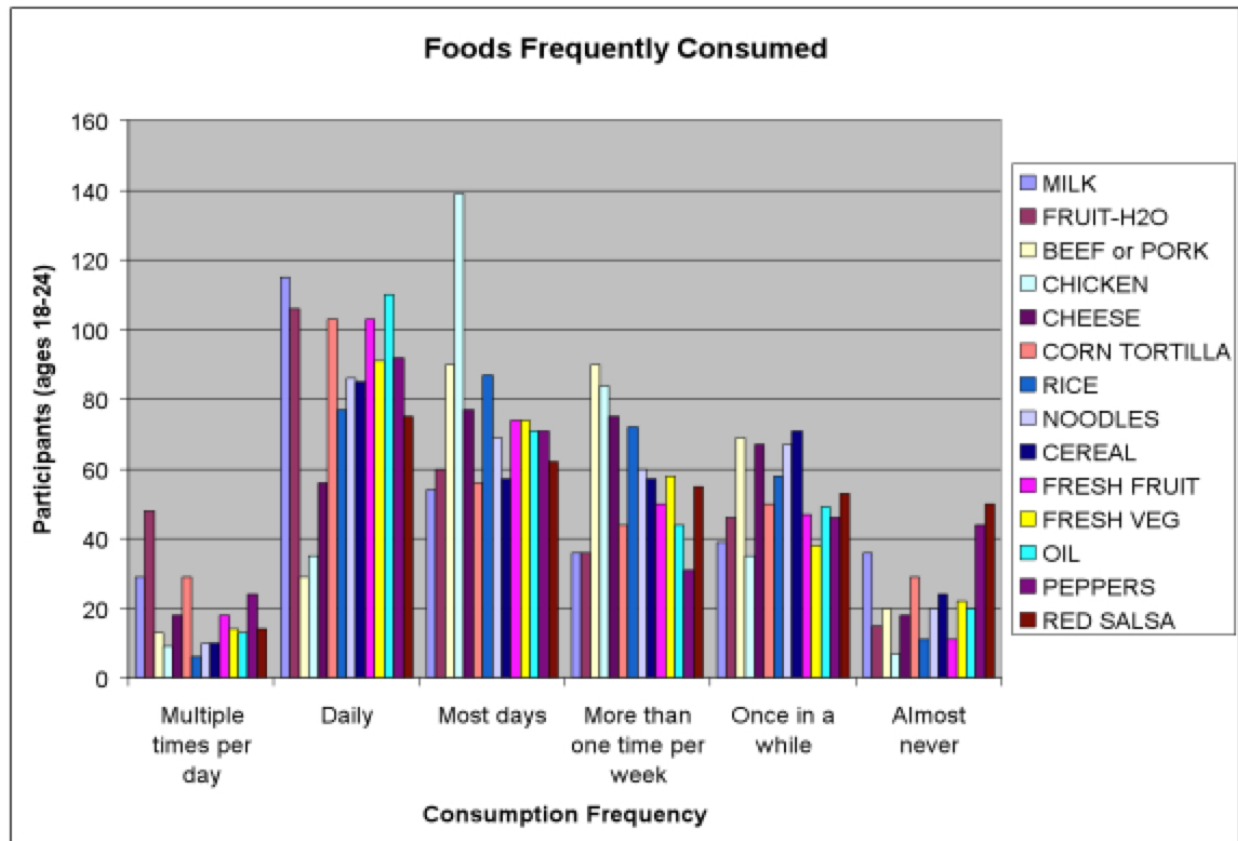


Figure 1. Graphical depiction of most commonly consumed foods.

## CONCLUSIONS

The objective of the research project was to determine the foods that make up the core diet of Mexicans living in the state of Veracruz, Mexico. Based on this objective the foods that were eaten most days of the week or more were considered part of the core Mexican diet. These foods were milk, fruit-based waters, beef or pork, chicken, cheese, corn tortillas, rice, cereal, noodles, fresh fruit, fresh vegetables, and peppers. Since 69% of the respondents fell into the 18-24 age category it is more realistic to assume that the food items that were determined to be a part of the core diet were those items found in the core diet of Mexicans aged 18-24 living in the state of Veracruz, Mexico. Food consumption frequency differences were found within the three different communities, but these results were not graphically represented as they would further break down the core diet of Mexicans according to different geographical locations. With the findings of this study further research can be done to determine the core diet of Mexican Americans and changes that occur in their diet due to relocation to a new country.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This research was the starting point for future research concerning the dietary changes that occur upon relocation to a new country. A next step would be to do a similar study with Mexican Americans living in the United States and compare how the adapted core diet relates to the traditional core diet. This could then be used to discover ways to break down cultural barriers that are making Mexican Americans more susceptible to diseases related to poor nutrition. Recommendations for this study include having fewer consumption frequency categories to choose from. Daily, sometimes, and never could be acceptable choices that would determine the core diet of a population. Also, because of respondent age it was harder to generalize the results to the overall population. Lastly, be sure to translate and re-translate any materials as small items may still be lost in translation.

## REFERENCES

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