

14 Eating Globally

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Key Points

- Be aware of cultural differences including types of food and proper eating utensils.
- Avoid foodborne illnesses by taking extra precautions: stay away from typical foods associated with foodborne illnesses.
- Make wise food and beverage selections when eating on the economy.
- Drinking contaminated water may severely affect your health: purify your water!
- Carry Pepto-Bismol and seek medical treatment for symptoms from contaminated foods or beverages.

Most operations take place on the soil of other countries and each country, region and even town may have their own culture. Foods are a large part of any culture and sharing meals can be a great way to interact and form relationships with the locals. Enjoying the local chef's food is important, but some cultural foods or approaches to preparing meals can lead to illness for those unaccustomed to local practices. This chapter will discuss cultural differences, foods that are and are not eaten based on religious beliefs, and how to avoid foodborne illnesses.

Cultural Awareness When Dining

Cultural awareness means recognizing, understanding, appreciating and respecting the different perspectives and customs of one's own culture and the culture of others. Culture involves language, beliefs, religion, values, behaviors, food preferences, and eating habits, and more.

[Click for religious food requirements and/or practices.](#)

Always be aware of the host country's surroundings and become familiar with the local customs and cultures to avoid stereotypes, prejudice, and insulting the host, particularly when it comes to dining.



As you deploy to different regions of the world, learn the eating customs and enjoy the dining experiences.

Cultural differences in eating habits may be as simple as using a fork and knife in Europe and the U.S. versus chopsticks in Asia or fingers in other countries. In some parts of the world a common plate is shared versus individual plates in other countries. In some countries, the right hand is considered the clean hand and is used for eating.

Some cultures eat primarily vegetarian meals and in other countries almost anything that moves is considered edible. Don't be surprised if you are fed lamb, goat, horse, dog, camel, or monkey. In many cultures all parts of the animal are consumed or used in cooking (brains, organs, feet, intestines, etc).

Different foods are used throughout the world in holiday and ceremonial meals. A few additional customs related to eating are listed; however, prior to deployment and throughout deployments, the local eating customs should be learned and respected.

Know the Local Customs

Don't be surprised when visiting another country to find many customs that we as Americans have never heard of. Do your homework before being deployed.

[Click here](#) for a list of countries and their staple foods, meats, popular dishes, typical fruits and vegetables, and beverages.

Think Before You Act...

The Basics

- Know whether punctuality is or is not emphasized.
- Use the appropriate customary greeting (hand shake, bow, etc).
- Learn if it is customary to bring a hostess gift, food, or beverages to the social gathering. In some cultures it is very impolite and implies that you are paying for the meal.
- Don't criticize.
- Know whether it is customary to clean your plate or leave a little food. In some cultures, cleaning your plate indicates hunger and poverty.
- Eating may be as much for social interactions as it is for nourishment. Do not rush through your meals.



- Do not be wasteful or gorge yourself. Your host may have gone to great expense to prepare an extravagant meal. Remember that it probably has been quite costly, and what you consume may cost a week's salary or feed his/her family for an extended period of time.

Who Eats First?

- Be aware of who should begin the meal—is it the host, the guest or the person of highest status?

Appetizers

- Some countries serve a salad with a meal, while others serve it as an appetizer or following the main meal.

Soup

- Hot soups may be eaten after every dinner meal.
- Some foods are very spicy. The small green bean in the soup may actually be a hot pepper.
- Is slurping soup considered rude or acceptable and a sign of enjoyment?

Meats/Fish

- Pork is not eaten by Muslims for religious reasons.
- Christians keep dogs, cats, and horses for pets, while others may eat them for dinner.
- Fish is typically a neutral food.

Not Just Any Rice

- In Thailand, it is believed that rice has a sacred essence, and it is important to avoid inappropriate usage or disposal of rice.

Dessert

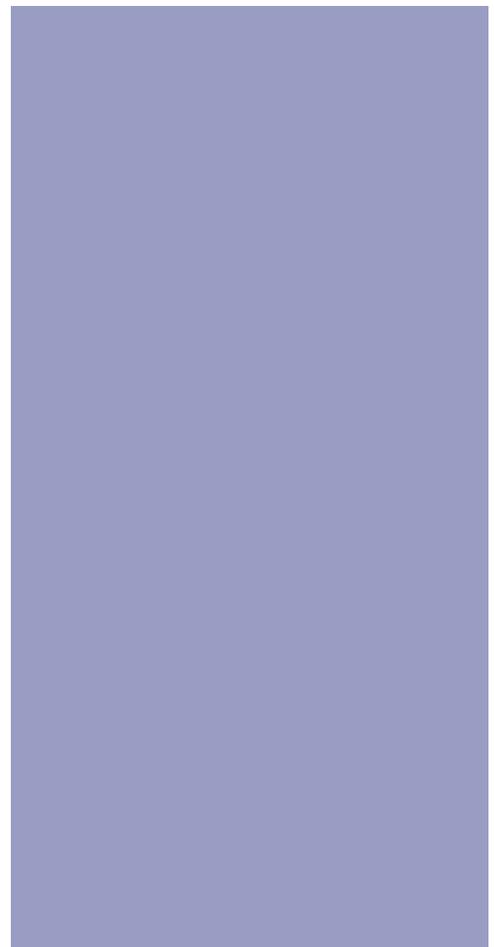
- Desserts may or may not be a typical part of the meal.

Beverages

- Coffee and tea may be served with sugar and cream already added; it may be very sweet.

Food Offerings

- Foods are typically offered when visiting and it may be rude to turn down a beverage.
- If you are the host in a developing country, serve something when others





visit your office or, as you would be treated when visiting their office.

- Try not to refuse beverages and food when offered.

What Time is Dinner Being Served?

- Meals are eaten at different hours of the day.

Eating Instruments

- Some countries use the fork as the primary eating utensil and others use the spoon, hand or chopsticks.
- Be familiar with the use of chopsticks and whether they are used for the entire meal or only with the appetizers.
- Follow the host's lead. Is rice pushed from the rice bowl directly into the mouth or eaten with a utensil?
- Is soup consumed with a spoon or drunk directly from the bowl?
- Bosnian Muslims, unlike Arab Muslims, use their left hand when eating or passing objects. In Saudi, the left hand is considered the dirty, toilet hand.

Proper Dress Attire

- Dress appropriately and not too informally.
- In certain cultures, it is important to remove shoes at the door.

Paying the bill

- Paying for a meal is generally done by the one inviting.
- Paying is considered an honor.

Good Ideas

- Become aware of local food taboos.
- Avoid yawning at the table.
- Excessive or loud talking and joking during a meal may be considered rude.
- Don't criticize.
- It may be impolite to stare at someone while they are eating.
- Become familiar with local foods that have traditional medicinal qualities or are used as folk medicine.

Foodborne Illness

Situations may arise where food choices are extremely limited, like when deploying to austere environments in developing countries. In addition, when an international host presents foods and beverages, it may be difficult to refuse what is offered.

It is very important to be courteous of local customs and culture surrounding food preparation and consumption.

When placed in situations where food and beverage choices are limited, a few basic principles should be followed to avoid foodborne illness. To maintain operational readiness and prevent the common gastrointestinal distress or “traveler’s diarrhea,” paying close attention to what you eat and drink is essential.

Foodborne illnesses are “infections” caused by consuming food or water that contains selected bacteria, viruses, parasites, and/or various harmful toxins, such as pesticides, poisonous mushrooms, and arsenic. The risk of infection varies depending on where the food is eaten—from fairly low in private homes to high in food purchased from street vendors.

The more than 250 different foodborne diseases have many different symptoms, so there is no one “syndrome” that describes foodborne illness. However, the “culprit” enters the body through the gastrointestinal tract, where the first symptoms—nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, and diarrhea—appear.

Foods Associated with Foodborne Illness

Certain foods are typically associated with foodborne illnesses. Raw foods, particularly of animal origin, are a major concern if served. Stay clear of:

- Raw meat and poultry.
- Ground beef and raw eggs.
- Unpasteurized milk or fresh squeezed fruit juice.
- Raw shellfish, including oysters.
- Raw fruits and vegetables.
- Salads.
- Alfalfa and bean sprouts.





Fruits and vegetables can be just as poisonous as raw meat and fish. Washing can decrease, but not eliminate, contamination, in part because the water may be contaminated, so consumers can do little to protect themselves.

Making Wise Food Selections

It is possible to make wise food selections; eating with caution may save a few days of discomfort. Remember these basic tips:

- Food that has been cooked and is still hot is usually safe.
- Some fish is not guaranteed to be safe, even when cooked, because of the presence of toxins.
- When eating at street vendors ensure foods are cooked in front of you. Do not select those that may have been cooked hours ago.
- Avoid raw ingredients, such as fresh vegetables. Fresh salads, even in many restaurants, can be contaminated due to the use of human waste for fertilizer.
- If offered a beverage, choose a safe one, such as boiled water, hot beverages (such as coffee or tea) made with boiled water, canned or bottled carbonated beverages, beer, and wine.
- Avoid ice in beverages. Ice may be made from contaminated water.
- Use purified or bottled water to brush your teeth. Do not even use small amounts of untreated water for rinsing your mouth.
- Fresh fruit and vegetables with skins are usually fine if cleaned thoroughly. Scrub the skin with purified water or soap and water and then peel. If not cleaned, the contamination may be transferred to the fruit or vegetable during the peeling process.
- Avoid fruits and vegetables that have already been peeled.
- Most bakery products are safe, but avoid those with a cream or meat filling.
- Order hamburgers cooked well-done and without lettuce and tomato.
- Avoid milk and juice that has not been pasteurized.
- Foods that have been deep fried or cooked thoroughly are acceptable to eat.
- Staple items such as pasta, rice, potatoes or other root vegetables that have been boiled or cooked over high heat, are safe items.
- Do not consume foods left at room temperature for over 4 hours.
- When eating eggs, ensure that the yolk is cooked until firm.
- High salt, high sugar, and high acid levels keep bacteria from growing, which is why salted meats, jam, and pickled vegetables are traditional preserved foods.

Drink only bottled water from approved sources.

Water Purification

“Montezuma’s Revenge” from contaminated drinking water can occur anywhere. Chemical disinfection can be achieved with either iodine or chlorine. These chemicals may not make water taste like bottled water from home, but it will decrease the risks of drinking untreated water.

The disinfection capabilities of iodine have been recognized for many years and iodine tablets are widely used as an emergency drinking water disinfectant.

- Add two iodine tablets to a 1.1 quart (1 liter) of water, wait 5 minutes, shake, loosen the cap, and then wait 30 more minutes before drinking.

Chlorine is also a reliable water disinfectant. Water purification tablets issued by the military that contain chlorine kill giardia lamblia cysts, bacteria, viruses, and other harmful micro-organisms, and remove sediment.

- Add 1 water disinfectant tablet (600 mg/ 1.4% available chlorine) to 1.10 qt (1 L) of water at temperatures of 77°F (25°C). Add two tablets (2.8% available chlorine) at 41°F (5°C) for the same purpose.

Lastly, boiling is a most reliable method to make water safe to drink.

- Bring water to a vigorous boil, and then allow it to cool.

Water purification tablets are intended for clarifying and disinfecting polluted/suspended water to make it safe for drinking.

Preventive and Treatment Measures for Foodborne Illness

Many different foodborne diseases may be prevented or treated. One preventive approach is Pepto-Bismol. Pepto-Bismol can be taken before and during international travel to help prevent diarrhea. The usual approach is to take two ounces of the pink medication four times daily, or two tablets, four times daily, for no longer than three weeks.

Side effects of Pepto-Bismol may include temporary blackening of tongue and stools, occasional nausea and constipation, and rarely, ringing in the ears. Do not take Pepto-Bismol if you have an aspirin allergy, renal insufficiency, gout, or are taking anticoagulants, probenecid (Benemid, Probalan), or methotrexate (Rheumatrex).

The treatment of foodborne illnesses depends on the symptoms. Illnesses that cause primarily diarrhea or vomiting can lead to dehydration more body fluids and salts (electrolytes) are lost than taken in.



Whenever possible, you should consult a health care professional for foodborne illness.



Careful hand washing can curtail and potentially prevent the spread of infection to other people.

The treatment of traveler's diarrhea requires the replacement of lost fluids and salts. This is best achieved by use of an oral rehydration solution, such as the World Health Organization's oral rehydration salts (ORS) solution. Another solution to electrolyte losses may be the new SportStrips, which deliver electrolytes directly through cells in the mouth. These SportStrips, by Health Sports, have not been tested, but do provide essential electrolytes independent of the gastrointestinal tract and may be helpful for gastrointestinal distress.

ORS packets, available at stores or pharmacies in almost all developing countries, are similar to Pedialyte. ORS is prepared by adding one packet to boiled or treated water. Packet instructions should be followed carefully to ensure that the salts are added to the correct volume of water. Sports drinks, such as Gatorade, do not replace the losses correctly and should not be used for the treatment of diarrheal illness. Electrolyte sport strips (<http://www.enlytenstrips.com>) should allow for rapid absorption of electrolytes and would be tastier than ORS.

For those who don't listen to warnings, Pepto-Bismol and other preparations of bismuth subsalicylate can reduce the duration and severity of simple diarrhea. Pepto-Bismol decreases diarrhea frequency and shortens the duration of the illness. An over-the-counter antidiarrheal medication, such as Lomotil or Imodium, can decrease the number of diarrheal stools, but can cause complications in people with serious infections. An antidiarrheal medication may provide symptomatic relief, but these medications should not be used with a high fever or bloody stools because they may make the illness worse.

Antibiotics (which require a prescription) may shorten the length of illness. The CDC does not recommend the use of antibiotics to prevent traveler's diarrhea because they can sometimes cause additional problems. Consult a doctor before taking these medications.

When to Consult a Health Care Provider

Foodborne illnesses can be dangerous and must be treated seriously. Consult a health care provider when diarrheal illness is accompanied by:

- High fever (temperature over 101.5°F, measured orally).
- Blood in the stools.
- Prolonged vomiting that prevents keeping liquids down.
- Signs of dehydration, including a decrease in urination, dry mouth and throat, and feeling dizzy upon standing.
- Diarrhea that lasts more than 3 days.

Do not be surprised if antibiotics are not prescribed for diarrheal illness. Diarrheal illness caused by viruses will improve in two or three days without antibiotic therapy. Other treatments can alleviate the symptoms, and hand washing can prevent others from becoming sick.