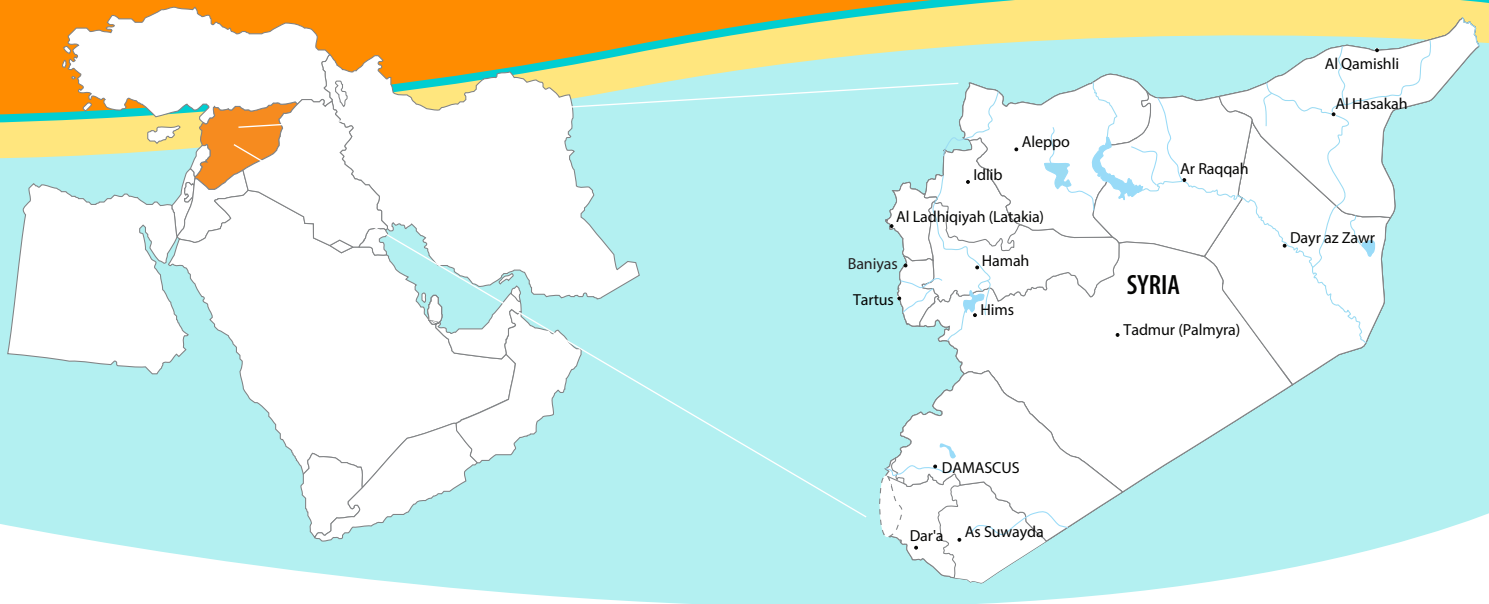


Food and cultural practices of Syrian communities in Australia - a community resource

Food is central to the cultural and religious practices of most communities. For this reason, understanding and appreciating the food and food practices of another culture is part of building your own cultural competence. What people eat is also important to their long-term health. When people migrate to Australia, changes to the food they eat and reductions in physical activity often result in poorer health in the long term. Common health problems include nutrition-related chronic diseases like type 2 diabetes and heart disease.



This resource provides information about the food and food practices of people from Syria settled in Brisbane (Australia). It also provides general information on traditional greetings and etiquette, a general background on their country and their health profile in Australia. For readers who are involved in nutrition education, there is also a section on culturally appropriate ways to approach this.

1. Traditional greetings and etiquette

The traditional greeting *Marhaba* (meaning 'Hello') will be well received by all Syrians. It is courteous to enquire about another's health, even when the people are not well acquainted.

Syrian women generally dress much more conservatively than Western women, and many Muslim women cover their hair with a headscarf and wear an overcoat. Some Syrians may be uncomfortable if revealing clothing is worn by health professionals or community workers.

If you are invited to someone's home, a small gift for the house (e.g. a plant), a box of chocolates or biscuits is appreciated. Syrian people may not understand or may even take offence if people bring food when invited to a meal. It may be interpreted as meaning that the guest does not believe that the host can provide for them. Traditionally, women do not pay for a meal eaten out when accompanied by a male.

2. Cultural information and migration history

Religion	The main religions in Syria are Muslim 87% (including Sunni 74%, and Alawi, Ismaili and Shia 13%), Christian 10% and Druze 3%. ¹ Syrians may or may not be devout in their faith: varying levels of religious belief and practice are accepted, even within the same family.
Ethnicity	Syria is a culturally diverse country. Arabs, including Muslims and Christians, make up around 90% of Syria's population. Kurds, Armenians, Turkomans and Circassians make up the remaining 10%. ² There are also a few thousand Jewish people. Despite Syria's cultural and religious diversity, it is a cohesive and tolerant society with little social division between those of different religions or ethnicities.

Language	Most Syrians have attended at least primary school and have basic literacy skills in Arabic. ¹ All Syrians speak, read and write in Arabic. ¹ Different ethnic groups may speak different languages and dialects at home.
History of conflict	Syria has been in civil war since 2011. By October 2014, nearly 9.5 million of Syria's 22 million pre-war population had been displaced. ¹ Of these, over three million have found temporary asylum in the neighbouring countries of Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. ¹ Only about 15% of Syrian refugees live in refugee camps. ¹ Those living in camps are mainly Muslims. The rest live outside camps, in cities, towns and rural areas, often in difficult circumstances and in locations not easily reached by humanitarian aid organisations.
Migration history	Before migrating to Australia, many Syrian refugees will have lived in refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan or Turkey. ¹ While all camps generally meet international standards, conditions differ considerably. Because some people feel there is stigma attached to being a refugee and living in camps, they may choose to live in surrounding countries in other accommodation.
Gender roles	<p>Gender roles in Syria vary according to economic class, family, and where people reside (i.e. urban vs rural).¹ In many families, women look after the home and children, with cooking for the family being an important and enjoyed role; however, men may cook meat on the barbeque or enjoy cooking selected meals. In restaurants in cities, cooks are mostly men.</p> <p>Both men and women may shop for food. Men are mainly responsible for working and financially supporting the entire family, although in urban areas many women are in paid employment. In rural areas, both women and their husbands work to produce food.</p>
Household size	Little reliable information is available about the size of households in Syria, but authorities believe that they average between five and seven persons and that city households are slightly smaller than rural households. ³ Children live at home until marriage, and widows tend to live with their immediate family.
Population in Australia	The 2011 Census reported 8,713 people born in Syria living in Australia. The geographic distribution of Syrians in Australia is similar to that of Lebanese people, with New South Wales housing 61% of the total, and nearly 90% living in New South Wales and Victoria combined. ⁴

3. Health profile in Australia

Life expectancy	No data are available for the small number of Syrians currently living in Australia. In Syria, life expectancy in 2013 was 75.7 years, with 78.3 years for women and 73.4 years for men. ⁵
New arrivals	Those who have lived in refugee camps for a prolonged period are likely to suffer from malnutrition, with key nutrient deficiencies because the food provided is limited in its amount and variety. Those living outside camps may also be malnourished because they cannot afford sufficient food.
Chronic disease	Adult obesity prevalence was 21.6% in 2014. ² Syria is the 18th highest ranked country for death from coronary heart disease, with a death rate of 211 per 100,000 compared to 55 per 100,000 in Australia. ⁶ The national prevalence of diabetes in Syria was 7.4% in 2014. ⁷ These chronic diseases may have gone untreated since the conflict began due to loss of health infrastructure.
Other health problems	<p>Many Syrians have amputations and other war injuries, or a range of psychological conditions that may include insomnia, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression.⁸ Disordered eating due to psychological distress is likely to occur in some refugees arriving in Australia.</p> <p>Favism (Glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase deficiency) is also more common in people of Middle Eastern background, with a prevalence of around 3% of the population.⁹ Intake of fava beans (broad beans) by those with favism can result in haemolytic anaemia.</p>

3. Health profile in Australia – continued

Oral health	There have been reports of oral trauma injuries sustained during conflict. The loss of access to dental clinics, oral health practitioners and personal teeth-cleaning equipment due to the war have resulted in decreased oral hygiene and increased periodontal diseases. ¹⁰
Social determinants of health and other influences	Until recently, the Syrian government provided universal health care. ¹ Wealthy Syrians were also able to access private universities and health clinics. ¹ For this reason, Syrian people may have reasonably high expectations of the Australian health system. They are also likely to have reasonably high levels of health literacy. It is common for doctors in Syria to provide dietary advice, and people generally understand the links between food intake and health. Food literacy levels are also generally high.

4. Traditional food and food practices

Sharing meals with family and friends is an important social activity for Syrians. This includes inviting others to share a meal.¹ The Syrian cuisine is very like that of its Middle Eastern neighbours (e.g. Lebanese cuisine), with a wide variety of grains, meats, cheeses, fruits and vegetables eaten. Syrians are also used to purchasing and eating seasonally. They enjoy cooking fresh food rather than packaged or commercially pre-prepared goods. Vegetables and fruit are often purchased in large quantities from markets. Freezing vegetables may be viewed with suspicion due to perceived loss of nutrients.

Gardening is a popular pastime in Syrian communities, with herbs often grown on balconies in city units.

Religious and cultural influences

Syrians of all religious backgrounds share the same cuisine, with only minor differences. Muslims vary in the extent to which a halal diet is followed, although pork is universally avoided. Observant Muslims will not drink alcohol, but it may be consumed by more secular Muslims and those of other religious backgrounds. When alcohol is consumed it is almost always with food and/or on a special occasion.

Rural Syrians, including the Druze, are generally farmers who grow their own food and bake their own bread. They generally follow a vegetarian diet, with meat served only on special occasions. They prefer lamb but also eat chicken and beef. Pork may be avoided for religious reasons, and food is cooked with olive oil, ghee or animal fat.

Traditional meals and snacks

Breakfast	<p>Weekday breakfast consists of a number of simple dishes, often including white, salty cheeses (e.g. <i>labneh</i>, <i>haloumi</i>, <i>fetta</i> and <i>shanklish</i>), Lebanese flat bread, <i>manaquish</i>, <i>makdous</i>, olives, <i>zaatar</i>, olive oil, yoghurt, hummus, jam and a plate of green vegetables (cucumber is very popular). Breakfast is served with tea and coffee.</p> <p>On the weekends other dishes are added, such as <i>foole</i>, <i>fateh</i>, eggs and <i>sujuk</i> (a spicy sausage high in salt and fat) and pastrami (brined and dried meat).</p>
Main and other meals	<p>Lunch generally consists of a single main hot dish (e.g. <i>kafta</i>, <i>mujadara</i>, <i>molokhia</i> with chicken, <i>Sheikh Mahshi</i> or <i>Syrian broad beans</i>) with Arabic rice and/or flat bread, salad and pickles.</p> <p>For celebrations, a meal called a <i>mezze</i>, composed of many small dishes, may be eaten. These dishes can include dips (such as hummus and <i>moutabel</i> (an eggplant dip known in Australia as <i>baba ghanouj</i>) and <i>muhammara</i>), savoury meat or legume-based items (such as <i>kibbeh</i>, <i>sambusic</i>, <i>bastirma</i> (highly seasoned, air-dried, cured beef, camel, lamb or goat), kebabs, falafel and stuffed grape leaves) and salads, e.g. tabouleh and breads (flat bread and lahmajun) with olives, <i>shanklish</i> and pickles.</p> <p>Barbeques are also popular. Foods served at barbeques include meats (e.g. lamb or beef kebabs, <i>Shish Tawook</i> (chicken breast kebabs), <i>fattoush</i>, tabouleh, flat bread, and dips like hummus, <i>baba ghanouj</i> and <i>muhammara</i>.</p> <p>Dinner is usually late and similar to breakfast, or can include a falafel or <i>shawarma</i>, or a hamburger made with beef or lamb.</p> <p>Fish from the coast or freshwater fish is a favourite food; however, many people may be unfamiliar with shellfish or other seafood. A favourite dish is <i>samaka harra</i> (whole fish stuffed with roasted red pepper and walnut).</p>

4. Traditional food and food practices – continued

Fruit and vegetables	<p>Popular choices include cherries, peaches, grapes, apricots, apples, oranges, mandarins, other citrus fruits, berries, dates, figs, plums and watermelons. Syrians generally like to eat fruit before it is ripe. This includes some nuts (e.g. green almonds and pistachios). Popular vegetables include eggplant, tomato and cucumber. Vegetables pickled in salt and vinegar (e.g. turnips and cucumbers) are eaten with many meals.</p>
Snacks	<p>Salted watermelon seeds (<i>bezer</i>), dates, almonds and walnuts that have been soaked in cold water, and olives are eaten as snacks. Meat- and cheese-filled breads, pizza and pastries may be eaten when out (e.g. <i>sambusic</i>, <i>lahmajun</i> and <i>manaquish</i>), as well as <i>shawarma</i> (lamb or chicken meat roasted on a large skewer and wrapped in flat bread with hummus, garlic paste and tahini, with or without salad and pickles), which is similar to souvlaki.</p>
Beverages	<p>Cups of tea and coffee are often drunk throughout the day and are served with lots of sugar. Herbal teas include rose hip and camomile, and spiced teas with walnuts are also popular. <i>Mate</i>, made from the yerba mate plant, is widely consumed and may be drunk in large quantities. Sugar and cardamom may or may not be added. <i>Mate</i> contains caffeine, polyphenols and a variety of antioxidants, and has been linked to a number of health benefits including weight loss.</p> <p>Cold drinks include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Ayran</i>, a cold, salted yoghurt beverage mainly drunk in summer and during Ramadan. • <i>Jallab</i>, a fruit syrup made from carob, dates, grape molasses and rose water. It is usually sold with crushed ice and floating pine nuts and raisins.¹¹ • Syrian mint lemonade (sometimes called <i>Bolo/Pollo</i>), made from fresh lemon juice, mint leaves, sugar and water. • Tamarind drink, made with dried and soaked tamarind and sugar. • <i>Erek el-sous</i>, distilled from the roots of liquorice plants and generally unsweetened. It has been linked with many health benefits, but too much of it can cause high blood pressure.¹² <p>Alcoholic drinks include <i>arak</i> (a clear, aniseed-flavoured liquor made from grapes, which is generally diluted with water and ice), wine, and Syrian and imported beer.</p> <p>It is important to be discrete when discussing alcohol consumption, especially with Muslim clients.</p>
Celebration foods and religious food practices	<p>Observant Muslims participate in Ramadan except when they are sick, weak, pregnant, breastfeeding or aged less than 12 years old. During Ramadan, people do not eat or drink from sunrise (<i>alfajer</i>) to sunset (<i>Maghreb</i>). They may have three meals during the night, or a large meal after sunset and snacks during the night. They generally have a light meal with water or fruit juice before sunrise. Favourite drinks during Ramadan include tamarind drink, <i>ayran</i> and <i>erek el-sous</i>.</p> <p>Eid al Fitr is the festival that follows Ramadan. It lasts for three days. Common foods that Syrian people eat during Eid are home-made or bought sweets (e.g. <i>baklava</i>), biscuits and cakes (e.g. <i>Mamoul</i>, a shortbread biscuit filled with dates, walnuts or pistachios), nuts and fruits.</p> <p>Eastern Orthodox Christians also have fast days, including the 40 days of Lent, when they abstain from all animal products (meat, fish and dairy, wine and other alcoholic drinks!).</p> <p>Food is an important part of many celebrations. Apart from religious festivals, food is also a central element at weddings, parties and other festivities.¹³ Religious and other celebrations are a time to visit relatives and neighbours. The same celebration foods are eaten by followers of all religions. Visitors are often provided with a gift of sweets (e.g. sugar-coated almonds, nougat and Turkish Delight) to take home.</p>

Common traditional foods

Breakfast foods

Chickpea fateh/fatteh, made from chickpeas, yoghurt, tahini, garlic and salt on a lebanese (flat) bread base.



Fateh is served topped with paprika, cumin and pine nuts, or almond slivers fried in ghee or butter.

Alternative: Chicken *fateh* is made from boiled chicken with yoghurt, garlic, tahini, and roasted pieces of bread and chicken stock.

Foole, made from broad beans, lemon juice, fresh garlic, olive oil, chopped tomato and parsley.



Salad dish with broad beans as the main ingredient. The beans are boiled and served with chopped tomatoes, parsley, onions, garlic, olive oil and lemon. Foole can be served alone or with a yoghurt and tahini sauce.

May also be eaten as the evening meal.

Makdous/magdoos, made from baby eggplants, red chillies, garlic, walnuts, salt and oil.



Baby eggplant stuffed with walnuts, red chillies, garlic and salt, and pickled and preserved in olive oil.

Main meal items

Kafta (Syrian meatballs in rich tomato sauce), made from minced lamb, red chilli flakes, onion, tomato, oil or ghee, and salt.



Minced lamb is mixed with a range of spices, including red chilli flakes, and cooked in a pan with chopped onions and oil or ghee. The mixture is then formed into balls, placed in an oven pan with chopped tomatoes and salt, and baked in the oven. *Kafta* is served with rice.

Mujadara, made from brown or green lentils, salt, long-grain rice or *burgul*, and oil. It is garnished with fried, browned onion.



Frequently eaten and easy to make, a main meal that is accompanied by turnip pickles and a green salad.

Molokhia with chicken, lamb or beef, made from dried or fresh molokhia leaves, chicken breast and drumsticks, chicken stock, spices (cardamom, bay leaves, cinnamon and cloves), oil, ghee and salt.



Eaten all year round as a family main meal. Molokhia leaves are cooked with oil or ghee before adding the meat. Lemon juice is poured on the top of the dish immediately prior to serving. *Molokhia* dishes are usually served with rice, although some families may eat them with bread.

Sheikh Mahshi/Ablama, made from small zucchini, ground lamb or beef, onion, tomato, vegetable oil or ghee, salt, pepper, yoghurt, tahini, garlic and fresh mint.



Small zucchini fried in oil or ghee, stuffed with ground lamb and onion, and then cooked in a yoghurt or tomato paste-based sauce and garnished with fresh mint. *Sheikh Mahshi/Ablama* is eaten with flavoured rice, yoghurt and pickles, with or without flat bread. Other types of *mahshi* may include eggplant, vine leaves, capsicum and potatoes stuffed with minced beef, walnuts, pine nuts, rice, garlic, tomatoes or parsley.

Common traditional foods– continued

Syrian Broad Beans/Fool Moukala Bi Zayt, made from fresh (including the pod if young) or frozen broad beans, olive oil, salt, fresh coriander and garlic.



Served at room temperature with a topping of yoghurt (garlic may be added), with lemon squeezed on top. It is eaten as a vegetarian main meal served with bread, or served as a side dish with other dishes as the main meal.

Arabic/Syrian/vermicelli rice, made from very thin wheat spaghetti pieces (e.g. fideli, fideos), rice, meat stock, ghee and salt.



Syrians generally have a preference for flavoured rather than plain boiled or steamed rice. Medium- or short-grain white rice is cooked in meat stock with vermicelli pasta and served with pan-fried pine nuts and flaked almonds.

Rice may also be cooked with oil or ghee and topped with a sprinkle of black pepper.

Mezze items (including cheeses)

Kibbeh, made from minced lamb or beef, burghul, onion and a range of spices (e.g. cumin, basil, chilli powder and mixed spices), pine nuts, ghee and salt.



Kibbeh is the national dish and is cooked in various ways (raw, baked or fried, or cooked in yoghurt) and is prepared in various shapes. It is a time-consuming dish that requires a mincing machine. *Kibbeh* are eaten as a main meal at lunch and at special occasions and larger family gatherings.

Borak/sambusak/samosa, made from flour, canola oil or ghee, melted butter and salt, and may be topped with poppy or sesame seeds.



A range of savoury filled pastries, with the most popular being filled with meat, spinach or cheese. *Borak* can be oven baked or deep fried.

Fillings: Cheeses (e.g. feta), egg and savoury mince (lamb or beef).

Lahmbajeen/Syrian pizza/sfiha, made with minced beef or lamb, onion, garlic, tomato, salt, and a range of herbs and spices.



Syrian pizza with minced beef or lamb, onion, garlic, tomato, salt, and a range of herbs and spices.

May be eaten when out for lunch or dinner.

Manaquish is similar and is made from bread dough (flour, yeast, olive oil and salt), topped with *Za'atar*, cheese or spiced meat.

BBQ items

Fattoush, made from flat bread (toasted or fried), cucumber, radish, onion, tomato and mixed herbs (including *sumac*, a deep red spice that adds a lemony taste to salads and meats), tossed with vinegar and olive oil.



Fattoush is a Middle Eastern salad belonging to the family of dishes that use stale flatbread as a base. *Sumac* is usually used to give *fattoush* its sour taste.

Fattoush is eaten at barbeques or as a snack, and is an essential food during Ramadan.

May include fresh pomegranates or pomegranate syrup.

Common traditional foods– continued

Muhammara, made from red capsicum, breadcrumbs, walnuts, garlic, tahini, pomegranate molasses, cumin, chilli flakes, olive oil and salt.

Optional: Onion, garlic, chilli flakes and lemon juice.



Muhammara is a spicy red capsicum and walnut dip made with pomegranate molasses and served with toasted flat bread.

Celebration and sweet foods

There are many traditional Syrian desserts. Most are made from pastry or a semolina dough, nuts, a sugar syrup and sometimes a sweet cheese. The desserts listed below are two examples.

Kanafeh is a dessert made from vermicelli/shredded filo pastry and stuffed with layers of *Ashta* (Syrian clotted cream) or thickened cream, milk, semolina, sugar and rosewater, sweet white cheese, nuts and syrup.



Eaten after main meals as a dessert. Syrians enjoy a broad range of sweet cakes, with common ingredients including semolina, various pastries, nuts (almonds, pistachios, cashews and walnuts), honey and sugar syrups, cheese, cream, and butter or ghee.

Mabroumeh, made from vermicelli pastry, pistachios, sugar and ghee.



Mabroumeh is a sweet vermicelli pastry wrapped around nuts (usually pistachios) and cut into pieces.

Like *baklava*, it is eaten any time, is offered to visitors, and can keep for a prolonged period of time.

Syrian spices

Za`atar, made from oregano, *sumac*, ground cumin, sesame seeds, salt and black pepper. May also include salt, thyme and marjoram.



Za`atar is commonly eaten with flat bread/pita, which is dipped in olive oil and then *za`atar*. It is also baked onto a Syrian pizza named *manaquish za`atar*.

There is a special type of *za`atar* from Aleppo (Northern Syria) that includes shredded coconut and pistachios.

5. Food habits in Australia

Many Syrians prefer to continue to follow their traditional diet after settling in Australia. They can source many of their favourite foods from local Middle Eastern food stores.

Food practices

Common foods: Fresh fruit and vegetables, legumes, meats including lamb (most popular), chicken and beef, white cheeses, yoghurt, cracked wheat and rice.

Meal patterns: Three meals a day, with some snacking on sweet foods (e.g. *baklava*, sweet biscuits, fresh and dried fruit), especially by children. Dessert is rarely eaten; mainly fruit. Sometimes bread with jam and butter is eaten after a main meal, but more often at afternoon tea.

Eating practices: Food plays an important role in the social lives of most Syrians. Cooking is enjoyed and is seen as a demonstration of caring for family members. In the cities, lunch may be eaten outside the home at local food outlets. Hospitality is very important, and meals with friends or visitors are likely to last two to three hours.¹⁴

For some meals, foods may be picked up using flat bread rather than eating with utensils. At breakfast, family members may have a plate with flat bread beside it, or just flat bread, with food being eaten directly from communal plates. Muslims traditionally do not use their left hand when eating.

5. Food habits in Australia – continued

<p>Adaptations to diet in Australia</p>	<p>Alternative foods: Spinach may be substituted for Mulukhiyah/molokhia (<i>corchorus olitorius</i>) leaves in Australia, although they are available in some Asian food markets. Most traditional foods are available in cities where migrants from similar Middle Eastern countries (e.g. Lebanon) have settled. Some foods that were made in the home seasonally and preserved are now purchased frozen or ready made, e.g. frozen broad beans and canned chickpeas.</p> <p>Changes to diet: Generally, the foods eaten change little after settling in Australia. Many people use olive oil as a substitute for ghee in their cooking in Australia, or substitute canola oil for high-temperature cooking and add olive oil for flavour.</p> <p>Other influences: In Syria, fresh fruits and some vegetables are seasonably available, resulting in an emphasis on preserving vast quantities of food for the winter months. In Australia, fresh fruit and vegetables are available and purchased all year round.</p>
<p>Cooking methods</p>	<p>A wide variety of cooking methods are used, including oven baking, frying, pressure cooking and barbequing. Pickling of vegetables is popular. Vegetable oils, ghee, butter and salt are often used in cooking a wide variety of foods.</p>
<p>Shopping/meal preparation</p>	<p>Shopping and cooking are often shared by both men and women. In Syria, food shopping is done daily, with visits to numerous specialty food shops; but in Australia, food such as flat bread may be purchased and frozen, and shopping done less frequently.</p>
<p>Food in pregnancy</p>	<p>Most Syrian women understand the importance of eating well during their pregnancy, for the health of their baby and themselves.</p>
<p>Breastfeeding and first foods</p>	<p>Women are generally cared for by relatives and friends for the first month after birth. This is primarily for the health of the mother. They may eat high-iron foods such as liver or parsley-containing foods (e.g. tabouli) and drink camomile tea with walnuts. If the baby has colic, they are provided cooled boiled water with <i>yansoon</i> (anise – a spice also known as aniseed) as a remedy.</p> <p>Syrian women are generally keen to leave hospital quickly after birth. This is due to high hospital costs and because family will look after them.</p> <p>Breastfeeding: Most women breastfeed for up to the first 15 months or longer. This is especially so for Muslim women because the Koran recommends that infants should be breastfed for the first two years, with breastfeeding considered to be a child’s right. Women generally don’t express milk for later use. Babies are encouraged to feed quickly after birth, and the value of colostrum is recognised.</p> <p>Babies may be given water to drink from a spoon early, i.e. at 3–5 months old.</p> <p>Potential breastfeeding issues: Women may supplement breastfeeding with artificial formula if they consider that they can’t provide enough breastmilk for their baby. Women generally consult their doctor before ceasing breastfeeding if they are ill or require medications that may be harmful to their infant.</p> <p>Introduction of solids: Solid foods are generally introduced at around 4 months. Food group introduction is staged. First foods are rice- or wheat-based baby cereals with milk, then puréed fruits (e.g. banana and cooked apple). Puréed vegetables are added at around 6 months. Once infants have teeth, they eat the foods provided to the rest of the family.</p>

6. Working with Syrian communities

Using an interpreter	<p>An interpreter is likely to be required. You will need to organise an interpreter appropriate to the person's or group's ethnicity.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Almost all Syrians speak Arabic.• Arabic interpreters from Syria, Iraqi, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt or Palestine can be used. Arabic speakers from Sudan may be difficult to understand.• For Kurdish refugees, their dialect should be established before requesting a Kurdish interpreter (i.e. <i>Kurmanji</i> or <i>Sorani</i>). They may also be open to the use of an Arabic-speaking interpreter.• It is important that a trained and registered interpreter be used when required. The use of children, other family members or friends is not advisable. Health and other services must consider the potential legal consequences of adverse outcomes when using unaccredited people to 'interpret' if an accredited interpreter is available. <p>If you have limited experience working with an interpreter, it is recommended that you improve these skills prior to the appointment. There are many online orientation courses available, and Queensland Health has produced guidelines (available here) for working with interpreters.</p>
Literacy levels	<p>Children are taught to write early, because the Arabic script is difficult to learn later in life. Of the total population in Syria aged 15 and over, 86.4% can read and write in one or more languages. Literacy rates are higher for men than women (91.7% vs 81%).²</p>
Motivating factors for a healthy lifestyle	<p>Syrians highly value Western medicine and place great faith and trust in doctors.¹ They are also generally well educated about food and its links to health. For this reason, most Syrians will seek medical attention early and will follow instructions provided by health professionals. An understanding of the potential health consequences of not complying with dietary recommendations may increase the probability of behaviour change.</p> <p>Because Syrians value their traditional cuisine and food is eaten communally, they are likely to take dietary advice only as long as taste is not compromised and recommended food is culturally appropriate.</p> <p>Eating fresh food, being frugal and recycling are valued behaviours in Syrian society. For this reason, dietary recommendations that involve eating affordable, seasonally available food are likely to be well received. Use of leftovers will also be welcomed.</p> <p>The health and wellbeing of family members is generally very important to Syrian people. For this reason, Syrians can be enlisted to encourage other family members to follow dietary advice. This is especially important in the care of elderly or ill relatives, who are considered to be the family's responsibility.</p>
Communication style	<p>A friendly, open approach is likely to result in good communication. It is important to gauge the level of education and expectations of health and other services of individuals or groups you work with to ensure you pitch communication at the appropriate level.</p> <p>Many Syrians are passionate about their food, so be prepared for animated and detailed discussions on their cuisine.</p>
Health beliefs	<p>Syrians have a good understanding of the link between health and dietary behaviours, with many people reducing their intake of saturated fat and moving to wholegrain foods. Fresh foods are valued over more processed foods and viewed as healthier (and more palatable) choices.</p>

Useful information

Queensland Health *Working with Interpreters: Guidelines* (http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/interpreters/guidelines_int.pdf)

To find out more about multicultural health, Queensland Health's Multicultural Health page has information for the public and for health workers, including the *Multicultural health framework*. Go to <http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/default.asp>

For Metro South Health telephone interpreter services, go to <http://paweb.sth.health.qld.gov.au/pasupport/administration/interpreters/booking.asp>

Halal Square Groceries Database identifies halal-certified items that are available in supermarkets around Australia. See <http://www.halalsquare.com.au/groceries/>

Refugees from Syria by the Cultural Orientation Resource Centre (COR), which was published in November 2014. See <http://www.culturalorientation.net/library/publications/refugees-from-syria>

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