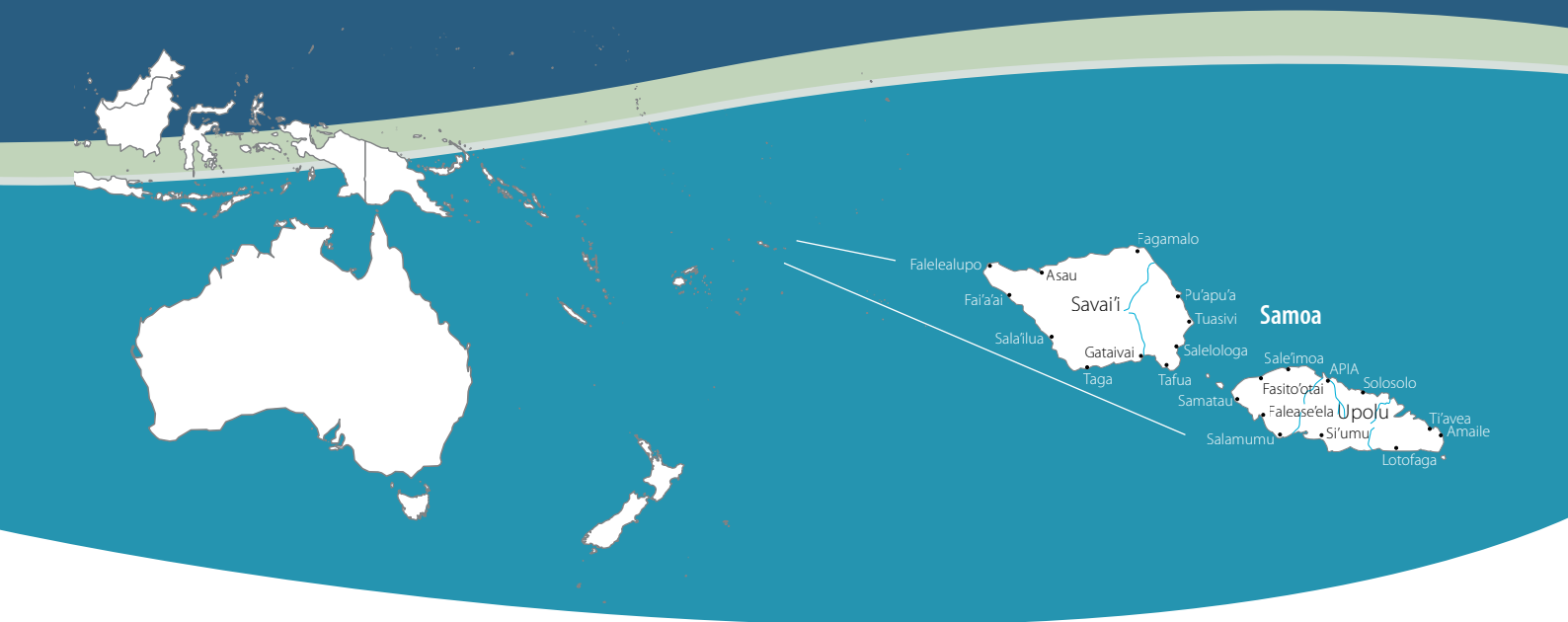


# Food and cultural practices of the Samoan community in Australia - a community resource

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 Samoan people 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

English	Samoan	Pronunciation
Hello	<i>talofa lava</i>	tah-lor-fah lava
Thank you	<i>fa'afetai lava</i>	fah-ah-feh-tie lava
Goodbye	<i>Tofa soifua</i>	tor-fah soy-foo-ah

When communicating with the Samoan community it is important to:

- be relaxed and friendly while maintaining formality
- speak slowly in a conversational style
- maintain eye contact, but avoid staring
- remove your shoes at the door if entering a client's home
- replace negative words such as "avoid" and "don't have" with encouraging words such as "work on", "try to" or "swap"
- show appropriate respect towards older persons, as they are held in very high esteem in the Samoan community.

## 2. Cultural information and migration history<sup>1,2</sup>

<b>Religion</b>	Samoans in both Samoa and Australia are predominantly Christian. In Australia, 99% of Samoans are Christians of various denominations (including Seventh Day Adventists), with small percentages of Baha'is, Muslims and other religions.
<b>Language</b>	Samoan is the traditional language; however, English is also common. In Australia's 2011 Census, 11.9% of those born in Samoa reported that they spoke English not well or not at all.
<b>Migration history</b>	For the many Samoans entering Australia via New Zealand, under the Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangement, arrivals after 2001 are not entitled to social security unless a permanent visa has been issued and a two-year waiting period served. For this group, permanent residents in Australia can enrol for a Medicare Card. This allows access to the Enhanced Primary Care and other primary health programs and services.
<b>Gender roles</b>	Samoan culture is based on a patriarchal system, with women generally taking on more domestic responsibility, including the food shopping and cooking.
<b>Household size</b>	In Australia, the average household is seven to eight people, with many larger households including an extended family.
<b>Population in Australia</b>	In the 2011 national census, 19,092 individuals in Australia identified as Samoan born. Official figures may be underestimated due to migration via New Zealand.

## 3. Health profile in Australia<sup>1-10</sup>

<b>Life expectancy</b>	Life expectancy in Samoa is 69.6 years for males and 75.4 years for females. There is no reliable data for Samoan life expectancy in Australia.
<b>New arrivals</b>	Of the Samoan-born population in Australia, 59% arrived prior to 2001, with 18% arriving between 2001 and 2006, and 17% between 2007 and 2011.
<b>Chronic disease</b>	<p>Samoan-born persons have high rates of chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes, overweight and obesity. Queensland data shows that between 2006 and 2008, the standardised hospital separation ratio for diabetes was three times higher for the Samoan-born population when compared to the Australian-born population, while the standardised hospital separation ratio for diabetes complications was seven times higher.</p> <p>Between 2003 and 2007, hospitalisations from heart failure for Oceania-born Queenslanders were 31% higher compared to the Australian-born population. Although there remains a lack of research on Samoan communities specifically in Australia, the effect of migration and cardiovascular disease (CVD) risk have been examined in a select number of studies on Samoan-born populations residing in similar industrialised nations such as New Zealand and the United States. Amongst Pacific Islander groups in New Zealand, Samoans have the highest estimated CVD risk. Compared to European New Zealanders, the five-year risk score of CVD has also been found to be significantly higher amongst Samoans.</p>
<b>Oral health</b>	In large households with limited finance, the cost of toothpaste and toothbrushes may impact on oral hygiene practices.
<b>Social determinants of health and other influences<sup>3,4,11</sup></b>	Samoan-born migrants in Queensland are disproportionately represented in the middle to low income bracket. Levels of education and employment are lower compared to the general population, with only 35% of the Samoan-born population having a higher education qualification compared to 56% of the total population.

### 3. Health profile in Australia<sup>1-10</sup> – continued

#### Social determinants of health and other influences<sup>3,4,11</sup> – continued

Poor health literacy is evidenced by a lack of knowledge and/or awareness of available health services, as well as low levels of confidence in navigating the healthcare system. Furthermore, health literacy may also be impacted by Samoan cultural attitudes and beliefs. For example, sickness can often be seen as not only a physiological condition, but also a social or familial circumstance; hence, hesitation from the individual in seeking medical attention may occur until the situation becomes urgent. The cultural influence of desirable body image may also impact on health behaviours, as large body size is traditionally associated with power, wealth and prosperity in Samoan culture. However, younger Samoan persons in Australia may not be influenced by this, and may be more vulnerable to Westernised body image ideals.

### 4. Traditional food and food practices

#### Religious and cultural influences

At weddings, funerals, church openings or other public events, there is a formal presenting of gifts (*fa'aaloaloga*) to distinguished guests, including drinks with money in them (*vailolo*), trays of food with biscuits, cans of corned beef, or other small foodstuffs (*amoamosa*). Members of the Seventh Day Adventist Church do not eat pork, shellfish or other 'unclean' foods, and some do not consume caffeinated beverages such as tea and coffee.

Samoan culture is based on *fa'amatai* (a system of government) that has a *matai* (high chief) governing an entire *aiga* (extended family). Wealth and food are distributed on a needs basis, and honour and social standing are shared equally by all members of the *aiga*.

#### Traditional meals and snacks

<b>Breakfast</b>	Breakfast may include left-over dinner, boiled eggs, <i>koko araisa</i> (cocoa rice), cornflakes, fresh bread (unsliced) with butter, and <i>koko samoa</i> (hot chocolate drink). <i>Panikeke</i> are popular. These are like pancakes or doughnuts where the dough is moulded into round or flat shapes and deep fried or cooked as regular thin pancakes. They are either plain or filled with banana and pineapple.
<b>Main and other meals</b>	Meals consist of green bananas and taro (boiled or roasted), <i>sapasui</i> (Samoan chop-suey), <i>pisupo</i> (canned corned beef), <i>povi masima</i> (corned beef), mutton flaps, turkey tails, <i>palusami/lu'au</i> (coconut cream and onion cooked in taro leaves), <i>kale</i> (curry), rice, bread, fruit, sandwiches, soups, fish, <i>mamoe</i> (lamb), beef or <i>moa</i> (chicken).
<b>Fruit and vegetables</b>	Starchy root vegetables including taro, green bananas and tropical fruits are eaten.
<b>Snacks</b>	<i>Panikeke</i> , <i>masi popo</i> (Samoan coconut bread), <i>paifala</i> (pineapple pie), <i>vaisalo</i> (coconut tapioca porridge), <i>pani popo</i> (coconut buns), <i>masi saina</i> (yellow sunflower-shaped biscuits with soy sauce in the centre) are common snacks. Food is eaten whenever a person is hungry or if there is food available.
<b>Beverages</b>	Water, fruit juice and <i>koko samoa</i> (hot chocolate drink).
<b>Celebration foods and religious food practices</b>	<p><b>Special celebrations:</b> <i>To'ana'i</i> (every Sunday after church), weddings, funerals, birthdays, village or church meetings and <i>Lotu Tamaiti</i> (children's church day), referred to as 'White Sunday' in Samoa, are all celebrated.</p> <p><b>Celebration foods:</b> Whole fish, chicken or pigs are cooked in an <i>umu</i>, on hot rocks above the ground. <i>Kava</i> or 'Ava, a traditional drink made from dried powder of the kava root mixed with water. It is consumed during ceremonies and socially by men. Drinking <i>Kava</i> can produce muscle relaxation, sleepiness and a feeling of well-being. Long-term use can lead to liver damage, weight loss and apathy.</p>

## Common traditional foods

***Fa'alifu fa'***, made from green bananas with coconut cream



This is baked green bananas with coconut cream poured on top to serve as a savoury dish.

***Fa'alifu talo***, made from taro, coconut cream and onion



Taro is boiled in coconut cream with onion. Extra coconut cream is served on top.

***Sapasui***, made from beef, soy sauce, ginger and vermicelli noodles



Fatty cuts of meat are commonly used. *Sapasui* is always served with rice and maybe taro, bread or other starchy foods.

***Palusami* or *lu'au*\***, made from taro leaves, coconut cream and onion



This is often available in Samoan takeaway shops. It may have corned beef added. Cooked taro is dipped in the *palusami* or *lu'au* to eat.

***Koko araisa***, made from rice, coconut cream, sugar and grated 100% cocoa bean block



This is a popular dish eaten for breakfast or as a sweet evening supper dish; however, it may be eaten at any time throughout the day. An orange or lemon leaf is sometimes added for flavour.




***Kale***, made from meat, coconut cream, curry powder, onions and sometimes vegetables



Fatty cuts of meat are commonly used (mutton flaps, chicken, lamb or beef). *Kale* is served with rice, taro or bread.

\* Note: *Palusami* is the formal term used when speaking to an elder about this food, while *lu'au* is the colloquial term.

## Common traditional foods – continued

<p><b>Pisupo/canned corned beef</b></p>		<p>This is a popular Samoan food, commonly eaten with taro or bread. It is very high in fat and salt.</p>
<p><b>Povi Masim, made from a fatty cut of (beef) brisket, onion and cabbage</b></p>		<p>This is a type of corned beef, which has been brined and boiled with onion and cabbage.</p>
<p><b>Panikeke, made from plain flour, sugar, baking powder, vegetable oil (for deep frying), bananas or pineapples</b></p>		<p>These are a lot like doughnuts. A variety of sweet toppings can be added, e.g. jam, sweet nut spreads, ice cream or icing sugar.</p>

## 5. Food habits in Australia<sup>12,13</sup>

<p><b>Food practices</b></p>	<p><b>Common foods:</b> Taro, green bananas, rice, potatoes and fish.</p> <p><b>Meal patterns:</b> Samoans may not follow Westernised eating habits. As a consequence, some may eat whenever they are hungry. The concept of three main meals is loosely adopted. There are always large quantities of food served in a Samoan household, and leftovers are consumed the following day.</p> <p>The diet of the Samoan population in Queensland is known to consist of large portion sizes, and is rich in saturated fat and energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods.</p> <p><b>Eating practices:</b> Food is served based on the position in the family hierarchy (e.g. men and visitors are served first and children last). Families tend to use cutlery and plates and may sit at the table to eat.</p>
<p><b>Adaptations to diet in Australia</b></p>	<p><b>Substitute foods:</b> Most traditional foods are available within urban areas.</p> <p><b>Changes to diet:</b> Inclusion of other foods, e.g. two-minute noodles. Younger generations often prefer 'Australian foods' such as spaghetti bolognese, stir fries and fast food. The inclusion of other beverages, including soft drinks, cordial, Milo and alcoholic drinks depends on religious beliefs. Younger Samoans are more likely to drink alcohol than older adults.</p>
<p><b>Cooking methods</b></p>	<p>Conventional cooking methods including stovetop frying, boiling and oven baking. Meat is often not trimmed of excess fat due to taste preferences. Coconut cream is a very common ingredient used as both a garnish and a base ingredient, and staple starches such as taro and green banana may be boiled in coconut cream.</p>

## 5. Food habits in Australia<sup>12,13</sup> – *continued*

<b>Cooking methods – <i>continued</i></b>	Traditional cooking methods used in Australia include the use of an <i>umu</i> , a cooking method utilising hot rocks. The difference between Samoan and other Pacific Islander <i>umus</i> is that they are made above the ground, with logs marking out a square perimeter. The square is then filled with firewood and rocks, and burned until only the hot rocks remain. Taro and bananas are placed directly on the rocks, while meat, fish and/or vegetables are wrapped in banana leaves or other leaves and placed on the hot rocks. The <i>umu</i> is then covered with banana leaves and woven mats soaked in water, and the food is left to slowly steam. Males typically prepare and cook the <i>umu</i> .
<b>Shopping/meal preparation</b>	In Australia, food shopping and preparation are shared between family members, although men have less of a role in food preparation.
<b>Food in pregnancy</b>	In both Samoa and Australia, some types of seafood may be avoided during pregnancy. In Australia, women rely on medical information provided by the mainstream health system but also may be influenced by traditional advice from relatives, especially their mothers. More information on traditional health-related beliefs and practices relating to pregnancy and childbirth is <a href="#">available here</a> .
<b>Breastfeeding and first foods</b>	<p><b>Breastfeeding:</b> Queensland data indicates a lower rate of exclusive breastfeeding after birth among Samoan-born mothers when compared with Australian-born mothers (78% vs 83.3%). No data is available for exclusive breastfeeding rates for infants up to six months of age.</p> <p>Breastfeeding is often considered to be a contraceptive.</p> <p><b>Introduction of solids:</b> Complementary foods may be introduced before six months of age. Common complementary foods include mashed taro, <i>koko araisa</i> (cocoa rice) and mashed versions of family meals.</p>

## 6. Working with Samoan community members<sup>1,14</sup>

<b>Using an interpreter</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In Australia's 2011 Census, 11.9% of those born in Samoa reported that they spoke English not well or not at all.</li> <li>• Ask Samoan community members or groups if they would prefer (or benefit from) having an interpreter present (rather than asking if they speak English). Older Samoans may understand English but it may be difficult for them to respond in English.</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• If you have limited experience working with an interpreter, it is recommended that you improve these skills prior to meeting community members. There are many online orientation courses available, and Queensland Health has produced guidelines (<a href="#">available here</a>) for working with interpreters.</li> </ul>
<b>Literacy levels</b>	In Samoa, literacy rates are high. In the 2011 Samoan Census, the literacy rate was 98% for those aged between 15 and 24 years (97% for males, 99% for females).
<b>Be aware that ...</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family is the core of Samoan culture. Individuals, especially females, may prefer other family members to be present at meetings or events.</li> <li>• Samoan community members may have a different perception of time. Being late to a community event or meeting does not indicate that the activity is not perceived as important. Be aware of this when planning community events or appointments.</li> <li>• Churches are important potential partners for community health interventions.</li> </ul>
<b>Motivating factors for a healthy lifestyle</b>	Samoans are part of a collectivist culture. Motivating factors may include being fit and healthy in order to fulfil family, community and/or church obligations, as well as being able to look after and play with children. Young people may be motivated to lead a healthy lifestyle in order to participate in sport.

## 6. Working with Tongan community members – continued

<b>Communication style</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Especially for more traditional community members, Samoan language at events is used to recognise the importance of their cultural heritage regardless of the English language skills of participants. For the same reason, many Samoans have a preference for written resources translated into the Samoan language or tailored to their particular cultural needs, e.g. the use of graphic designs influenced by traditional Samoan artwork.</li><li>• Oral presentation skills are highly valued by many Samoan people. If you are asked to speak at a community meeting or event, ensure that you are well prepared and that cultural protocols are observed, especially in church settings. For example, prayers are generally said before meals are eaten.</li></ul>
<b>Health beliefs</b>	<p>There is generally a casual attitude towards health, and many Samoans may only seek medical advice as a last resort. Bark and roots of trees are used as traditional medicines. <i>Fo Fo</i>, a traditional Samoan massage, is used as a form of healing. Health and well-being are central to family life. Having enough food for all family members to be well fed is perceived to be very important. Some Samoans believe thin people are unwell, and that the bigger a person is, the healthier they are.</p>

### Additional resources

- Queensland Health *Working with Interpreters: Guidelines* ([http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/interpreters/guidelines\\_int.pdf](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>
- Voice of the Samoan People is a Logan-based community organisation to help support the Samoan community. Ph: (07) 3808 5054. <http://www.vospinc.org.au>
- The health of Queensland's Samoan population ([http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/health\\_workers/health-data-samoan.pdf](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/health_workers/health-data-samoan.pdf))

### References

1. Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship. Community Information Profile Samoan-born [Internet]. Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship; 2014 [cited 2014 Oct]. Available from [https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/02\\_2014/samoa.pdf](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/02_2014/samoa.pdf)
2. Queensland Health. Samoan Australians: Community Profiles for Health Care Providers [Internet]. Queensland Health Multicultural Services; 2011 [cited 2014 Oct]. Available from [http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/health\\_workers/Samoan2011.pdf](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/health_workers/Samoan2011.pdf)
3. Queensland Health. The health of Queensland's Samoan population 2009. Brisbane: Queensland Health; 2011. Available from [http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/health\\_workers/health-data-samoan.pdf](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/health_workers/health-data-samoan.pdf)
4. Galanis, D.J., et al. Dietary intake of modernizing Samoans: implications for risk of cardiovascular disease. *J Am Diet Assoc.* 1999; 99(2): 184–190.
5. Janes, C.R. and Pawson, I.G. Migration and biocultural adaptation: Samoans in California. *Soc Sci Med.* 1986; 22(8): 821–834.
6. McGarvey, S.T. Obesity in Samoans and a perspective on its etiology in Polynesians. *Am J Clin Nutr.* 1991; 53(6): 1586S–1594S.
7. McGarvey, S.T. Cardiovascular disease (CVD) risk factors in Samoa and American Samoa, 1990–95. *Pac Health Dialog.* 2001; 8(1): 157–162.
8. Siaki, L.A. and Loeschler, L.J. Pacific Islanders' perceived risk of cardiovascular disease and diabetes. *J Transcult Nurs.* 2011; 22(2): 191–200.
9. Sundborn, G., et al. Ethnic differences in cardiovascular disease risk factors and diabetes status for Pacific ethnic groups and Europeans in the Diabetes Heart and Health Survey (DHAH) 2002–2003, Auckland New Zealand. *N.Z. Med. J.*; 2008: 121(1281).
10. Queensland Health Multicultural Services. Summary of health data on culturally and linguistically diverse populations in Queensland; 2012.
11. Kaholokula, J.K.A., et al. Pacific Islanders' perspectives on heart failure management. *Patient Educ Couns.* 2008; 70(2): 281–291.
12. Renzaho, A. and Mellor, D. Applying socio-cultural lenses to childhood obesity prevention among African migrants to high-income western countries: the role of acculturation, parenting and family functioning. *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care.* 2010; 6(1): 34–42.

## References – continued

13. Queensland Health. Multicultural Clinical Support Resource; (Chapter on) Cultural dimensions of pregnancy, birth and post-natal care. 2009 [cited 2014 Oct 1]. Available from [http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/health\\_workers/cultdiver\\_guide.asp](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/health_workers/cultdiver_guide.asp)
14. Samoa Bureau of Statistics. Population and housing census 2011 Analytical Report [Internet]. Government of Samoa; 2011 [cited 2014 Oct]. Available from <http://www.sbs.gov.ws/index.php/new-document-library?view=download&fileId=1388>

## Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge QUT students Kathryn Muldoon and Jemma McCutcheon for their hard work in collecting and collating much of the information for this resource.

Thank you also to the members of the Samoan community who generously provided information on their traditional foods and their food practices in Australia, as well as many wonderful foods to taste.

### For more information contact:

Access and Capacity-building Team

Metro South Health

[access&capacity@health.qld.gov.au](mailto:access&capacity@health.qld.gov.au)



Queensland  
Government

Metro South  
Health

© State of Queensland (Metro South Health) 2015

**Please note:** The web links in this document were current as at March 2015. Use of search engines is recommended if the page is not found.