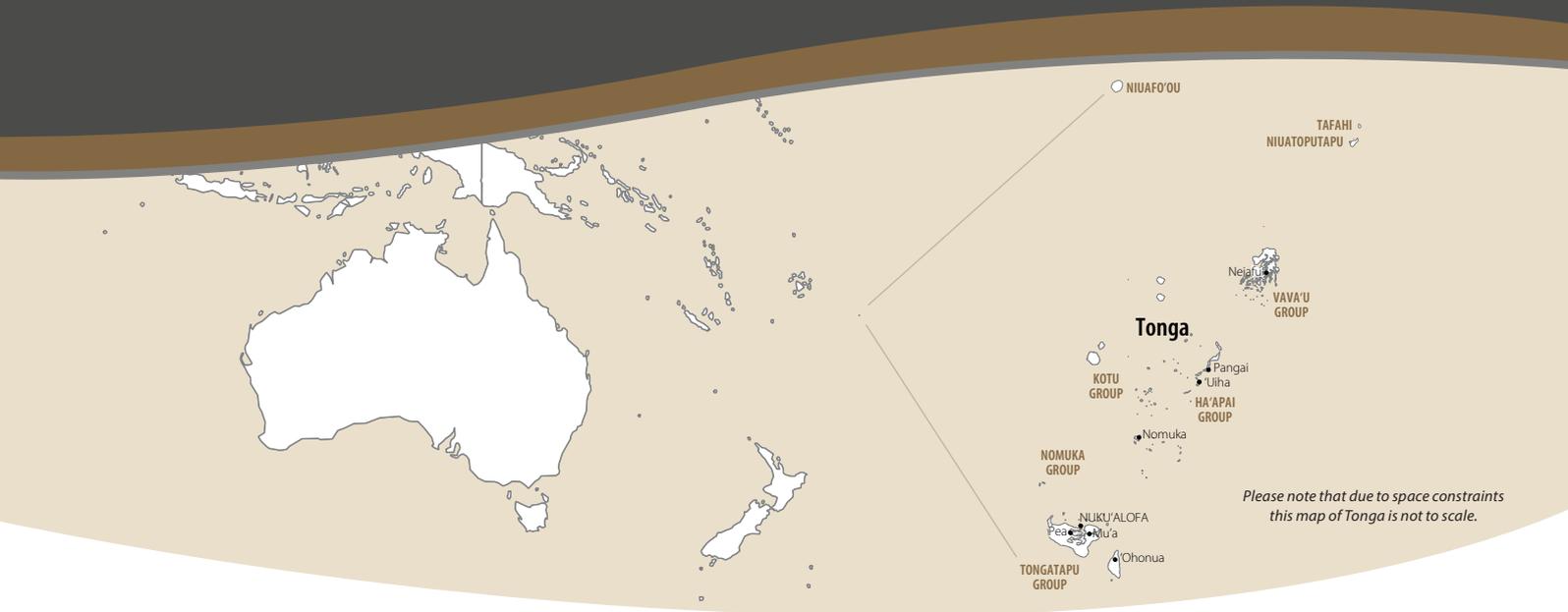


Food and cultural practices of the Tongan community in Australia - a community resource

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 Tongan 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	Tongan	Pronunciation
Hello	<i>Malo 'e lelei</i>	Mah-loh-eh-leh-lai
Thank you	<i>Mālō</i>	Mah-loh
Goodbye (said by the person staying)	<i>Alu ā</i>	Ah-loo-ah
Goodbye (said by the person going)	<i>Nofo ā</i>	Noh-foh-ah

Most Tongan community members appreciate hearing these greetings, as it demonstrates an interest in their culture.

- Maintaining eye contact is generally acceptable; however, some people may look away to show respect. A person may avert their eyes when talking with an older person.
- Be relaxed and friendly while maintaining formality.
- Older generations are seen as deserving of more respect from others.
- Discussion about sexual topics is considered taboo.

2. Cultural information and migration history

Religion	Tongans are predominantly Christian from a number of denominations. The Tongan 2011 Census found that the Free Wesleyan Church is the dominant Christian denomination, with 36% of the population affiliated to this church. This is followed by the Church of Latter Day Saints (18%), the Roman Catholic Church (15%), and the Free Church of Tonga (12%). ¹
Language	Tongan and English are the main languages spoken in Tonga. Literacy for people over five years of age was 98% in 2011, with 86% being literate in both Tongan and English. ¹
History of conflict	Tonga has been involved in little conflict despite longstanding interaction and trade with surrounding nations. European arrival did not affect the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Tonga, which has never been colonised.
Migration history	Tongan people have traditionally migrated directly to Australia, especially to study, since the 1970s. It is common for Tongan migrants to arrive via New Zealand.
Gender roles	Women generally take on domestic responsibility in the home, while men are seen as the heads of the families and the key decision makers.
Household size	Generally, people live in large households, which may include extended family. According to the 2011 Tongan Census, the average household size in Tonga is 5.7. ¹ In Australia in 2011, 36.5% of Tongan households were comprised of six or more people. ²
Population in Australia	The latest Australian Census in 2011 recorded 9,208 Tongan-born people in Australia, and 25,096 people identified Tongan ancestry. ³

3. Health profile in Australia

Life expectancy	No data is available for Tongan-born Australians. In Tonga, life expectancy is 74 years for males and 69 years for females. ⁴
New arrivals	Of the total number of Tongan-born migrants to Australia, 69.4% arrived in Australia prior to 2001, 8.6% arrived between 2001 and 2006, and 13.4% arrived between 2007 and 2011. ³ Many Tongan people may have migrated to New Zealand before arriving in Australia.
Chronic disease	Tongan people are at an increased risk of overweight and obesity, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular disease, hypertension, stroke and chronic kidney disease.
Oral health	Tongan people may be at increased risk of dental caries and decay, especially children, due to increased added sugar consumption from soft drinks, snacks and convenience foods. ⁵
Social determinants of health and other influences	Permanent residents in Australia can enrol for a Medicare Card. This allows access to the Enhanced Primary Care Program and other primary health programs and services. For those 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.

4. Traditional food and food practices

Religious and cultural influences

The vast majority of Tongans are Christian. Religious dietary practices can differ between denominations. Some Tongans follow a vegetarian diet or omit meat on certain religious days or events (such as Fridays during Lent).

Traditional meals and snacks

Breakfast	Common breakfast items include white bread or hard white crackers with butter/jam or <i>topai</i> (boiled flour dumplings) sweetened with sugar or <i>heu heu</i> (porridge made with white flour in water and boiled coconut milk).
Main and other meals	<p>Meals consist of three components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Starch: <i>Kumala</i> (sweet potato), <i>talo</i> (taro), <i>ufi</i> (yam), <i>manioko</i> (cassava), <i>mei</i> (breadfruit), <i>siaine</i> (banana, green) or <i>hopa</i> (plantain). • Meat: Mutton, beef, chicken, fresh fish, tinned corned beef or tinned fish. Eggs may be eaten at any time of the day. They are generally boiled or fried, but may be scrambled, made into an omelette, added to dishes like potato salad and fried rice, or included in baked goods. • Vegetables: <i>Lu</i> (taro leaves) or <i>pele</i> (a large, leafy green plant of the hibiscus family).
Fruit and vegetables	These include pawpaw, banana (ripe), avocado and mango.
Snacks	Snacks are not commonly consumed.
Beverages	Drinks include <i>niu mata</i> (young drinking coconut), <i>vei halo</i> (cooked young coconut milk boiled in coconut water) and <i>otai</i> (a variety of fruits, usually watermelon or green mango, shredded into coconut milk with or without added sugar and ice).
Celebration foods and religious food practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For feast days, an <i>umu</i> (traditional underground oven) may be used to cook a variety of foods. • Celebration foods include suckling pig cooked on a spit; <i>lu sipi/pulu/kapa pulu</i> (taro leaf parcels with onion; coconut cream and meat of choice – usually mutton, beef or tinned corned beef); <i>ota ika</i> (raw fish salad with coconut milk); <i>vei halo</i> (a dessert consisting of green coconut baked in an <i>umu</i>); <i>vai lesi</i> (cooked ripe pawpaw); or <i>vai siaine</i> (cooked ripe banana) in coconut milk. <p><i>Kava</i> is a bitter-tasting 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

Sapasui		This dish is made from vermicelli with meat. It usually contains cubed meat such as mutton, beef or pork cuts or tinned corned beef, and sometimes includes frozen vegetables. It is generally seasoned with large amounts of soy sauce.
Lu Pulu		This dish is made from corned beef (generally canned) with onions and coconut cream and is wrapped in taro leaves. It is traditionally baked in an <i>umu</i> but can be baked in a household oven. Beef can be substituted for mutton or lamb.

Common traditional foods – continued

<p>Ota ika</p>		<p>This is made from white fish soaked in lemon juice with coconut milk. It is generally served as a side dish with fresh vegetables.</p>
<p>Faikakai</p>	 <p>1. Faikakai topai</p>  <p>2. Faikakai mali mali</p>	<p><i>Faikakai</i> are dumplings with a sweet sauce. The sweet sauce consists of boiled sugar and coconut milk. Dumplings are made by cooking tapioca starch with or without vegetables. Dumpling varieties include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Topai</i>: Plain dumplings made from white flour. 2. <i>Mali mali</i>: Dumplings made from flour and pumpkin. <p><i>Faikakai Ngoua</i> (ngo-ah) is another type of <i>Faikakai</i>. It is made from <i>kumala</i> (sweet potato) or <i>talo</i> (taro) leaves cooked with wheat or <i>manioke</i> (cassava) flour.</p>
<p>Keke isite</p>		<p>These are fried dough balls made from sugar, flour, water and coconut milk. They are usually eaten without any accompaniments.</p>

Other common traditional foods include *Lu* (taro leaves), *kumala* (sweet potato) leaves, *pele* (Pacific spinach), *hopa* (plantain), *talo* (taro), *manioke* (cassava), *ufi* (yam), *kape* (alocasia or giant taro) leaves (top leaves only; lower leaves and stem contain high levels of oxalates and can be poisonous), and mutton flaps, which are very high-fat offcuts from the rib area of mature sheep.

5. Food habits in Australia

<p>Food practices</p>	<p>Meal patterns: The main meal is usually consumed in the evening and a smaller meal during the day. Breakfast consumption is a regular practice.</p> <p>Eating practices: Food is typically consumed using cutlery and plates in Australia.</p>
<p>Adaptations to diet in Australia</p>	<p>Substitute foods: Traditional meat cuts such as mutton flaps may be substituted with other meats more commonly available. Canned corned beef is available in supermarkets in Australia, and brands familiar to Pasifika communities are available from specialty stores. The specialty brands may be higher in fat and/or sodium.</p> <p>Changes to diet: After arrival in Australia, many Tongans increase their consumption of meat, soft drinks, and fast foods such as KFC and McDonalds, accompanied by a decrease in seafood and vegetable consumption. There is a perception that Western foods are associated with social popularity.</p>
<p>Cooking methods</p>	<p>The main cooking methods are baking, deep frying, pan frying and boiling.</p>

5. Food habits in Australia – continued

Shopping/meal preparation	Female family members are responsible for cooking and shopping. <i>Umus</i> (traditional underground ovens) and suckling pig on the spit are prepared by male family members.
Food in pregnancy	Most pregnant women will continue to eat the same foods as before their pregnancy. Vitamin and mineral supplementation during pregnancy is widely practised in Australia; however, some women may include more green fruits in their diet. Pregnant women may avoid some varieties of seafood that have a very strong flavour (e.g. oysters) because it is believed that the strong flavour will cause discomfort to the foetus. Similarly, they may also avoid consuming 'fizzy' (carbonated) drinks because they believe that the 'gas' will cause discomfort to the foetus. Cravings for particular foods and beverages are commonly reported.
Breastfeeding and first foods	<p>Infant feeding practices of Tongans in Australia are unknown. In Tonga, common practices are as follows:</p> <p>Breastfeeding: The mean duration of exclusive breastfeeding is 4.5 months, and five months for predominantly breastfeeding.⁶ Breastfeeding tends to be prolonged in urban areas. Artificial formula is used in both rural and urban areas.</p> <p>Beliefs relating to breastfeeding: There is a general belief that if the mother eats well, then the baby who is breastfeeding will also eat well. For this reason, breastfeeding women may avoid extremely salty and fatty foods, including tinned corned beef and fatty cuts of meat.</p> <p>Older female relatives may recommend hot milky drinks, particularly hot cocoa (cocoa powder, milk and sugar) and/or Milo, to increase milk supply, resulting in some women having up to five cups per day, while tea and coffee are discouraged. Some women are aware that there is a link between breastfeeding and a reduced risk of developing breast cancer.</p> <p>Introduction of solids: Weaning begins earlier for mothers from rural areas than it does for those from urban areas. Women may chew food and then feed it to infants as their first solid food.⁷ Monetary concerns are a main constraint in determining the types of complementary foods provided.</p>

6. Working with Tongan community members

Using an interpreter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask Tongan community members or groups if they would prefer (or benefit from) having an interpreter present (rather than asking if they speak English). Older Tongans may understand English, but it may be difficult for them to respond in English. • 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. • 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 (available here) for working with interpreters.
Literacy levels	In Tonga the literacy rate for people over five years of age was 98% in 2011, with 86% being literate in both Tongan and English. ¹
Be aware that ...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family is the core of Tongan culture. Individuals, especially females, may prefer other family members to be present at meetings or events. • Tongan 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. • Churches are important potential partners for community health interventions.
Motivating factors for a healthy lifestyle	Tongans 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 to be able to look after children.

6. Working with Tongan community members – continued

Communication style	<p>For older Tongans, translated and culturally tailored resources are likely to be more effective when carrying out health promotion and other interventions.</p> <p>Good presentation skills are valued by traditional Tongans. Check if any cultural protocols need to be observed, especially when presenting in church settings, e.g. prayers before meals.</p>
Health beliefs	<p>Some people tend not to link disease with food intake and may have a casual attitude towards the benefits of healthy eating behaviours.</p>

Additional resources

- 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>

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