

# HAITI

## History

- The native Taino Amerindians inhabited the island of Hispaniola when discovered by Columbus in 1492 and were virtually annihilated by Spanish settlers within 25 years.
- In the early 17th century, the French established a presence on Hispaniola, and in 1697, Spain ceded the western third of the island to the French which later became Haiti.
- The French colony, based on forestry and sugar-related industries, became one of the wealthiest in the Caribbean, but only through the heavy importation of African slaves and considerable environmental degradation.
- In the late 18th century, Haiti's nearly half million slaves revolted under Toussaint L'Ouverture. After a prolonged struggle, Haiti became the first black republic to declare its independence in 1804. The poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, Haiti has been plagued by political violence for most of its history.
- After an armed rebellion led to the departure of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in February 2004, an interim government took office to organize new elections under the auspices of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH). Continued violence and technical delays prompted repeated postponements,
- Haiti inaugurated a democratically elected president and parliament in May of 2006.
- Immigration: Immigrants to the US encounter the problems and difficulties common to many new arrivals, compounded by the fact that the Haitians are "triple minorities": they are foreigners, they speak Haitian Creole that no one else does, and they are black.
- Results from Census 2000 show 419,317 foreign-born from Haiti live in the U.S., representing 1.3 percent of the total foreign-born population of 31.1 million and 0.1 percent of the total population of 281.4 million.



## Geography

- Caribbean, western one-third of the island of Hispaniola, between the Caribbean Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean, west of the Dominican Republic
- Climate: tropical; semiarid where mountains in east cut off trade winds
- Religion: Roman Catholic 80%, Protestant 16% (Baptist 10%, Pentecostal 4%, Adventist 1%, other 1%), none 1%, other 3% note: roughly half of the population practices voodoo
- Languages: French, Creole
- Economy: Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, with 80% of the population living under the poverty line and 54% in abject poverty. Unemployment is very high; 6 out of 10 people are illiterate and more than a quarter of the children suffer from malnutrition. The average household income in Haiti is only \$250 American/year.

- In recent years, tourism declined as the political stability of the country declined. Exportation of Haitian goods is also down due to trade sanctions. These factors have led to a further loss of income for the country and the people.
- Haitians in America send money back home to help family especially after hurricanes.

### **Culture**

- Haitian culture fuses African, French, and West Indian elements. Formerly a social divider, the Creole language is now being used in attempts to define a national culture. The language is used in literature, drama, music, dance, and some governmental functions.
- Voodoo Culture has its own lingo. In fact, many seemingly incomprehensible words that are part of voodoo culture come from the sacred, the religious; it is the language of the ancients. These are the objects or actions that our ancestors found no other word to describe. Some of these words can be recognized today by people from West Africa, but the meanings have shifted over the centuries and that voodoo is a seventeenth century medley of different African cultures mixed with that of the surviving American aborigines.
- Family structure is strong and children are kept close to home.
- Haitian society is matriarchal especially where family life and child-rearing is concerned. Common law marriage is considered the norm. The man is most likely to hold ultimate authority and control in most matters relating to the world outside of the family. Parents use corporal punishment as a means of discipline. Respect for adults, support to family and doing well in school are strong values held by Haitians.

### Health Concerns of Immigrants

- In the late 1980's, The Food and Drug Administration refused to accept the donation of blood from individuals of Haitian origin because they were identified as a primary group for the risk of AIDS and tuberculosis. Common health risks or problems of new Haitian immigrants include:
  - Malnutrition
  - Anemia
  - Dengue fever
  - Typhoid
  - Malaria
  - Tuberculosis
  - Parasites
  - HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, including cervical cancer
  - Cardiovascular and related diseases; obesity, hypertension and diabetes.
  - Gastrointestinal cancers
  - Haitian beliefs about illness and health are influenced by Haitian life where access to healthcare is very limited to even the basics such as clean water, immunizations and prenatal care.
  - Folk medicine is used to treat many illnesses. Even though in American Haitians may go to a health care provider they may still use the herbalist or Voodoo practitioner for additional treatments. Voodooists represent the largest sector of the Haitian population - there's a

saying here that Haitians are 90 percent Catholic, 100 percent voodoo. Voodoo baptisms and marriages are not recognized by the Haitian government.

- Most Haitians will see a health care practitioner for a specific problem. The compliance rate for following doctor's orders is not very high due to either not understanding the cause of the chronic illness, reliance on traditional medicines or not maintaining a lasting relationship with health care providers.

### Food Management Practices

- Haitian society mainly consists of peasants who live simple lifestyles. Peasants own or rent a small plot of land
- Men plant and harvest the crops while the women typically take care of the children, prepare meals, and sell the extra crops they have grown at the local market.
- Markets are the center of economic and social activity in small Haitian villages, and a place where mostly women sell produce. Women sometimes walk several miles each way to the market carrying large baskets of produce on their heads.
- Though vegetables and fruits are probably the most commonly sold food, salted codfish, and various meats, and manioc flour are also popular. Haitians in America purchase fish which is native to their diet.
- There are no refrigerators, so seafood and meat is typically covered in salt to help preserve it in the warm, outdoor markets. Other homemade products such as clothing, cooking utensils, and baskets are also sold.
- Peasants usually begin the day with a light breakfast of locally grown coffee and bread made of manioc flour since wheat flour usually is too expensive for peasants
- Beans and rice is one of Haiti's national meals. Ingredients include: red beans (pinto), scallions, garlic, parsley, bonnet chili pepper.
- Pumpkin soup is traditionally eaten for breakfast on Sundays, for those who can afford its ingredients (it is also eaten on New Year's Day in celebration of Haiti's national independence.)
- Parents do not perceive children as overweight. Overweight in children is partially related to limited physical activity, because parents are working and children are often dependent on their own limited resources for physical activity. Parents prepare traditional Haitian cuisine which contains high fat foods, added sugar to traditional home prepared beverages and children additionally consume fast foods and sweetened beverages as a process of assimilation. These factors all contribute to increased weight.

### Food Practices Related to Life Cycle and Major Celebrations

- Most Haitians are Roman Catholic and observe their religion. It is an important part of Haitian life and culture. In addition to visiting family and enjoying delicious meals together, celebrations are also a time to forget about everyday poverty and hardship. They observe such holidays as Good Friday, Easter Sunday, and Christmas
- On Christmas Eve in Haiti, Roman Catholics attend midnight mass, followed by a celebration dinner and gift exchanges. Typically, only the homes of the wealthy will own a Christmas tree, but everyone in a village might get to enjoy pis d'etoil (firecrackers).

- National holidays are also popular. November 2nd is All Souls' Day (or the Day of the Dead). On this special day, loved ones who have passed away are honored and their lives celebrated through storytelling, eating, and drinking. Many people choose to place food in front of a loved one's grave or on the table where they used to eat. Only after the food has been offered will the rest of the family enjoy their own meals.
- One of the most widely celebrated events in Haiti is Carnival or Mardi Gras.
- Haitians who practice voodoo enjoy harvest festivals that take place for two days each November. Haitian peasants observe Manger-Yam (mahn-djay YAM), literally meaning "eat yam" day. Along with singing and dancing, the festival is celebrated by feasting and drinking. The purpose of this day is to recognize the importance of the yam in the rural Haitian diet. May be celebrated by some in the US.

### Communication

- Most Haitians speak Creole.
- When speaking with friends Haitians use direct eye contact and an active tone of voice. They avoid eye contact when speaking with people.
- Speech is usually accompanied with hand gestures. The conversations may get loud but it does not necessarily indicate anger.
- Conversation tends to be direct except when discussing certain personal topics.
- Uneducated Haitians may smile and nod their heads when they do not understand or they may appear timid and keep to themselves.
- Touching like embracing and kissing is acceptable between friends in informal situations except between members of the opposite sex.
- Haitian need much less personal space than Americans and may come close to you when speaking.
- They are also more oriented in the present and tend not to be punctual, unless it is emphasized that punctuality is a priority. Because of this they may be late for appointments and not consider it as being rude.

Reviewed by: Nutritionists at BONDC Boston Organization of Nutritionists and Dietitians of Color