

Japanese Culture & Foods

Country of Origin: Japan

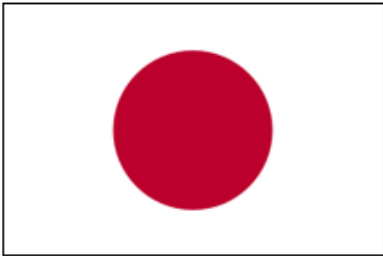
Primary Language(s): Japanese, Ryukyuan, [Tokyo, Kansai, Kyushu dialect]²²

Percent of Iowa's Population: 0.04%²⁶

Where are we from?



Japanese Traditional costumes: (Left) Kimono for female, (Right) Yukata for male.



Japan flag: The circle in the center of the flag represents the sun. Red color means brightness, sincerity and warmth. White background represents honesty and purity. Japan's name translates to 'The land of the rising sun'.²⁷

Historical Background

Human inhabitation in current land of Japan dated back in about 3000 BC. The imperial line was believed to exist since the 3rd century which is still in place today.¹⁷ During the Kofun period (AD 300 – 710), manufactured articles, weapons, and agricultural tools were introduced from China and Korea. The period is named after the huge mounded tombs (Kofun) that were built for the political elite. This period is noted for a more centralized Japan which is heavily influenced by China in city planning, writing system, building of Buddhist temple and paper making.²⁴ In the late 8th century, emperor's power weakened and Japan was ruled by Shogun under the name of Emperor. During 13th - 14th century, trading in Japan grew and merchants became wealthy. Tea seeds imported by China and tea ceremony were introduced.¹⁷ During the Edo period (1600-1868); Tokugawa shoguns ruled Japan for over 260 years and for some 200 of these years the country was virtually shut off from foreign contact by the shogunate's policy of national seclusion.²⁴ During Meiji Period (1868-1912), Japan was modernized to the industrial form. First merchandized silk mill was opened, telegraph, railway, newspaper, compulsory education was introduced. Japan suffered huge loss during World War II when atomic bombs were dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, its economy boomed in the mid-20th century and is now one of the prosperous nations in the world.⁷

Traditions, Customs, & Taboos

The two main religions in Japan are Shintoism and Buddhism. Most Japanese follow both religions, for instance, marriages are usually held at Shinto shrines but funerals at Buddhist temples.²⁸ There is also a Christian minority in the country. Japanese household usually consists of two parents and their children, called nuclear family.⁵ A strict code of behavior and politeness is recognized and practiced by almost all Japanese. They greet each other by bowing.¹² For Japanese, food is an art form. Careful preparation and meticulous presentation are crucial elements of Japanese cuisine.¹¹ As for table manners; it is deemed impolite when one put down their non-dominant arm under the table during meal time. Making slurping sound while eating noodles and drinking soup is normal for Japanese.¹³

Holidays & Celebrations

The Japanese New Year celebration is the most significant and important holiday which last from Jan 1st-15th. Businesses are closed for the first 3 days and people spend time with family and friends. On Jan 15th, Japanese celebrate Coming of Age Day, a ceremony for every young person who turns 20 over the year.¹⁸ Setsubun marked the first day of spring according to the ancient lunar calendar. They believe throwing beans during the ceremony will drive away evil spirits.²¹ Cherry Blossom festival usually falls on March to May. Obon, Festival of Souls, is the most important Buddhist festival in Japan. Family will visit shrines/temples and family graves. It is a day to remember ancestors/family members who passed away. Christmas is not a holiday, although many Japanese celebrate Christmas Eve by eating cake or going on romantic dates.¹⁸

Health Disparities

The top three leading causes of death as of 2015 in Japan are cerebrovascular disease, ischemic heart disease and lower respiratory infection.³ Diabetes and hypertension are the two major chronic diseases in Japan. Salt intake has been identified as a major risk factor for hypertension in Japan. Despite of these, Japan is the second country in the world with highest life expectancy at 84.74 year.¹⁰ This may be due to a healthy lifestyle, diets, sanitation and hygiene and healthcare system.³ As for maternal and child health, maternal mortality ratio and infant (neonatal, perinatal and under-five) mortality rate was reduced by more than half between 1990 and 2015.

Traditional Foods & Meal Patterns

Rice is the main staple in Japanese cuisine. Sometimes noodles replace rice.² A typical Japanese meal consists of rice, a main dish (protein), pickled vegetables, a bowl of miso soup and side dishes (often cooked vegetables).¹⁴ Common vegetables include Chinese cabbage, eggplant, radish and yams. Common fruits are mandarin orange, apples, persimmons, Asian pears and melons. For desserts, sweet rice cake (mochi) is well known.²³ Japanese drinks hot/cold green tea or other Japanese tea along with the meal. Pregnant women are advised to avoid sushi with raw fish due to mercury content.¹ When not prepared safely; it can be contaminated with bacteria.

Education and Literacy

As of 2014, 101.8% of Japanese (regardless of age) graduated from secondary education¹⁶, 47.1% graduated from tertiary education.²⁰ Population age 15 and above has literacy rate of 99% as of 2014¹⁵. As for English proficiency, Japan ranked number 49 out of 88 countries/regions with EF English Proficiency Index score of 51.80/100 in 2018.⁶

Considerations for WIC

- Breakfast time for Japanese usually around 7am, lunch 12-2pm and dinner between 6-8pm. Breakfast and dinner meals are usually bigger than lunch.⁸
- Japanese pregnant women have low gestational weight gain among the underweight and normal BMI women which explains why low birth weight are common in Japan. Emphasize the risk of low birth weight is important for this population.⁴
- With Japanese's breakfast being similar to American's, WIC food items are useful. Other food items they can purchase with WIC include rice, Chinese cabbage, eggplant, bok choy and other oriental vegetables that can be found at the grocery store that accept WIC.
- Japanese do enjoy fish a lot. A reminder about risk of raw fish consumption during pregnancy might be beneficial.¹
- Japanese use many nonverbal signs to communicate with each other. They rely on facial expression, tone of voice and posture to tell them what someone feels. When standing next to a Japanese, make sure maintain arms-length wide for personal space. Direct eye contact is considered disrespectful, so when engaged in conversation, it is best to focus on the chin or tie.^{9, 19, 5}
- Making referrals for services through/to reliable organizations are important for Japanese populations. Make sure reason of referral and details of the meeting was explained. Before making referral, it is best to ask for client's approval and comfort level. They value face-to-face meeting and punctuality is a must.²⁹

Where are we living?

Total Japanese population in Iowa is about 0.04% of the total population in Iowa, 1277 people, based on population in 2010-2014.^{26, 25} Thirty one Japanese live in Pottawattamie County, majority in Council Bluffs. Other cities with a large Japanese population based on percentages of total population of the city include Iowa City, Ames, Des Moines, Cedar Rapids, Davenport and Cedar Falls.³⁰



Typical Japanese meal (clockwise): Rice, vegetables, nori seaweed, egg, pickled vegetables, omelets and miso soup. Pan fried fish (center).

