

**SOUTH INDIAN  
AND  
SRI LANKAN TAMIL  
FOOD EXHIBITION**

**EAST LONDON & THE CITY  
HEALTH PROMOTION  
&  
TAMIL AND MALAYALEE  
HEALTH ADVOCACY PROJECT  
NEWHAM**



## **TEXT FOR SOUTH INDIAN AND SRI LANKAN TAMIL FOOD EXHIBITION**

### **Introduction to the Exhibition**

This exhibition is concerned with the dietary habits of Malayalee communities from South India and the Tamil communities from South India and Sri Lanka.

The aim of this exhibition is to enhance the knowledge of health professionals about the traditional diet of these communities and the changing pattern of dietary habits particularly in relation to children under 5. We hope that it will help to promote healthy eating among pre-school children in these communities.

Traditionally most South Indian and Sri Lankan people were vegetarians; their main meal consisting of rice, one or two vegetarian dishes, yoghurt and pickles. However, a large number of people now eat meat and fish. This could be attributed to the fact that traditional vegetables are more expensive and less easily available in this country and that meat and fish is relatively less expensive than it was in their country of origin. One of the aims of this exhibition is to highlight the healthy attributes of the South Indian diet and to encourage the younger generation to eat more of their traditional foods as a prevention strategy against diseases such as coronary heart disease and diabetes in later life. There are some variations in the diet of South Indian and Tamil communities in East London as they come from different cultural, regional, and social backgrounds and family/personal choices also play a major part in their dietary habits.

April 1996.

## **General Nutritional Advice to Parents/Carers**

- Encourage children to eat a wide variety of foods from the four main food groups:
  - vegetables and fruit
  - bread, rice, other cereals and potatoes
  - pulses, fish, meat and eggs
  - milk and dairy products
- Children under two should not be given low fat milk, cheeses and yoghurts.
- Infants and young children are growing rapidly and to support this growth they need to have meals and healthy snacks spaced through the day.
- Children should be encouraged not to eat too many sweets and sugary drinks and when they do eat them they should be kept to meal times to reduce the risk of developing dental cavities.
- Over enthusiastic dietary manipulation can induce changes in eating behaviour that are contrary to those sought and can do more harm than good. Extreme dietary practices of any kind should be avoided.
- Despite a plentiful and varied food supply, there are still signs of dietary insufficiency within certain groups of the population; anaemia, rickets, and also cases of general malnutrition. Poor weaning practices and difficulty in adapting traditional food practices in a new culture are some of the factors that should be considered.
- Keep animals out of the kitchen
- Wash your hands before preparing food.
- Keep cooked and uncooked food separately in the fridge
- Fridges should be kept at the temperature recommended by the manufacturer.
- Don't reheat food more than once.

## **Nutritional Guidelines**

The Department of Health gives eight guidelines on Healthy Eating. These may be interpreted for the South Indian and Sri Lankan Tamil communities as:-

- Enjoy your food - have confidence in your own food customs, tastes and methods of cooking.
- Eat a variety of different foods - use traditional foods and try local fresh foods.
- Eat the right amount to be a healthy weight. Overweight and obesity are known to be an important factor in the development of coronary heart disease and diabetes in these and other South Asian communities.
- Eat plenty of foods rich in starch and fibre - rice, potatoes, ground cereals, lentils made into pancakes.
- Don't eat too much fat - cut down on frying, especially deep fat frying.
- Don't eat sugary foods too often - the increasing availability of traditional sweets and drinks as well as British confectionery means sugar is a problem for the communities.
- Look after the vitamins and minerals in your food - eat traditional and local fresh fruits and vegetables.
- If you drink alcohol, keep within sensible limits.

## Main Food Groups

Rice, Other Cereals, Bread and Potatoes	Vegetables and Fruit	Milk and Dairy Foods	Pulses: Fish, Meat and Egg
Examples	Aubergine, cabbage, ladies fingers (okra), carrots, coriander leaves, pumpkin, potato, bitter gourd, cucumber, peas, white radish, spinach, green beans, cauliflower, onion, lettuce, sweet potato, tomatoes, banana, jackfruits, guava, papaya, lime, kiwi fruit, oranges apples and water melon	Milk, yoghurt, cheese	Lentils, beans, fish - sardines, tuna, salmon, king fish, mullet, prawns, chicken, lamb
Main Nutrients	Starchy carbohydrate (source of energy). 'fibre' Protein, iron and calcium B-vitamins	Vitamin C, carotenes, folic acid. 'fibre'	Calcium, protein, vitamin A, D, B12 and riboflavin
Amounts	Eat plenty of these foods - they should be the basis of meals and snacks	Eat plenty of these, 5 or more servings daily.	Good servings of pulses, moderate servings of fish, meat, eggs  $\frac{1}{2}$ -1 pint of milk daily. 150 ml (1 small pot) natural yoghurt (undiluted) is equivalent to 1/3 pint of milk for calcium content

## Main Food Groups

Rice, Other Cereals, Bread and Potatoes	Vegetables and Fruit	Milk and Dairy Foods	Pulses, Fish, Meat and Egg
Nutritional Advice	<p>Cereals - rice and bread provide some protein, iron and calcium and when eaten in combination with pulses are an important source of these nutrients in vegetarian diets. Fried rice, containing vegetables, and/or meat, is becoming more popular as a quick meal or a packed lunch dish. Convenience needs to be considered and it may be better to advise people to use less oil (and use an unsaturated oil) or to cook a savoury rice in a steamer/microwave instead e.g. idllis and dosai</p> <p>Fresh vegetables should not be overcooked as this destroys vitamin C and folic acid. Serving vegetables as curries or deep fried in batter (fritters) are popular in these communities. Thus advice should stress importance of using less oil when making curries or stir frying, to try steaming and braising cooking methods and not to have deep fried vegetables too often. Fresh fruit used to be the traditional dessert at the end of a meal and this custom needs to be encouraged.</p>	<p>Yoghurt is an important food in these communities. If it is regularly taken diluted and sweetened as a drink, the calcium content is reduced and the sugar present can cause tooth decay. However, undiluted yoghurt with main meals is to be encouraged. It is used in a variety of ways such as salad dressing.</p>	<p>The consumption of pulses at main meals should be encouraged particularly in vegetarian diets. Oily fish should be encouraged especially as these fish are traditional in some South Indian and Sri Lankan communities and they are being replaced with deep fried fish fingers. Chicken is the main type of meat eaten and then mutton. Cow is considered sacred and beef is not eaten, while many groups do not eat pork. Chicken and lamb are being consumed more in this country than in India and Sri Lanka because it is cheaper and more readily available. Advice should be given on limiting the size of meat portion, using leaner cuts, removing skin and fat, and using cooking methods that avoid excessive frying.</p>

## Main Food Groups

	Rice, Other Cereals, Bread and Potatoes	Vegetables and Fruit	Milk and Dairy Foods	Pulses: Fish, Meat and Egg
Examples	Rice, rice flour, lentil flour, sliced bread, potato, cassava, pittu (rice flour + coconut), rice noodles	Aubergine, cabbage, ladies fingers (okra), carrots, coriander leaves, pumpkin, potato, bitter gourd, cucumber, peas, white radish, spinach, green beans, cauliflower, onion, lettuce, sweet potato, tomatoes, banana, jackfruit, guava, papaya, lime, kiwi fruit, oranges apples and water melon	Milk, yoghurt, cheese	Lentils, beans, fish - sardines, tuna, salmon, king fish, mullet, prawns, chicken, lamb
Main Nutrients	Starchy carbohydrate (source of energy). 'fibre' Protein, iron and calcium B-vitamins	Vitamin C, carotenes, folic acid. 'fibre'	Calcium, protein, vitamin A, D, B12 and riboflavin	Protein, iron, B-vitamins
Amounts	Eat plenty of these foods - they should be the basis of meals and snacks	Eat plenty of these, 5 or more servings daily.	1/2-1 pint of milk daily. 150 ml (1 small pot) natural yoghurt (undiluted) is equivalent to 1/3 pint of milk for calcium content	Good servings of pulses, moderate servings of fish, meat, eggs

## Table 1

### Main Meal

#### *A Vegetarian Meal*

A typical vegetarian meal in Tamil and Malayalee communities consists mainly of rice and pulses (dhal), 2 or 3 vegetable curries, yoghurt based accompaniment, pickle/chutney, papadom, and fresh fruit. The meal shown below consists of:

DISH	MAIN FOOD GROUP
Lentil Curry	Pulse, fish, meat and egg
Okra Curry ) Aubergine Curry )	Vegetables and fruit
Boiled Rice	Rice, other cereals, sliced bread and potato
Yoghurt	Milk and dairy
Pickles	
Fruit	Vegetables and fruit
Yoghurt or payasam (semolina based milk and dairy milk pudding)	Milk and dairy

#### Advice to parents/carers:

- Encourage families to maintain their traditional vegetarian diet.
- Weaning on to a vegetarian diet is healthy provided foods are chosen from the four main food groups.
- Including pulses in the weaning diet will help to ensure a good intake of iron. However care should be taken not to make dhal curries and soups too thin as this dilutes the nutritional value of the dish.
- Fresh fruits and freshly cooked vegetables taken with the meal will aid iron absorption.

- Vitamin D plays an important role in bone formation. Low vitamin D intake is fairly common in Asian children and is associated with rickets, a disease characterised by poor bone development. In Asian communities in the UK there is often minimal exposure of the skin to natural sunlight by young girls which is a source of vitamin D. It is important that whenever possible young children are allowed to play outside.

#### **A note about eggs :**

Orthodox Hindus do not include eggs in their diet as they are considered to be non-vegetarian. Less orthodox Hindus sometimes give eggs to children, men and people who are ill. Eggs are mainly eaten as omelettes with spices or hard boiled. Some people make egg curries with vegetables and spices.

#### **A note about pickles:**

Pickles are often made sweet, bitter or sour with spices and used as a side dish. The main ingredients are mangoes, limes, lemon, green chillies and garlic. If the pickle contains a lot of salt it should not be given to children .

## Table 2

### Main Meal

#### *A Fish Meal*

Fish is a popular food particularly for Malaylees and Sri Lankans who lived on the coast. Popular fish eaten by these communities are: sardines, tuna, salmon, king fish, shark, mullet, sprats, prawns and crabs. In this country fish is usually eaten either in a curry or deep fried.

DISH	MAIN FOOD GROUP
Spicy fish curry	Pulses, fish, meat, egg
Beans or spinach curry	Vegetables and fruit
Carrot salad	Vegetables and fruit
Rice	Rice, other cereals, bread and potatoes
Yoghurt	Milk and dairy
Fruit	Vegetables and fruit.

#### **Advice to parents/carers:**

- Fish is regarded in these communities as very nutritious for children. This belief should be encouraged.
- Oily fish are a valuable source of vitamin D and iron.
- Grilled sardines are a more nutritious alternative to fish fingers.
- Where possible fish should be grilled, steamed or baked rather than deep fried.
- Cut down on the use of coconut milk and replace with low fat milk.

### Table 3

#### Main Meal

##### *Meat Dish*

The most commonly eaten meat is chicken. Mutton is more often eaten on special occasions. Most South Indians are Hindus. They avoid eating beef and pork as the cow is a sacred animal and pigs are considered unclean animals.

A typical meat meal consists of chicken curry (which can be made in a variety of ways), rice, 2 or 3 vegetable dishes including lentils, yoghurt and fruit.

DISH	MAIN FOOD GROUP
Chicken curry	Pulse, fish, meat and egg
Rice, string hoppers, pittu	Rice, other cereals, bread and potatoes
Tomato and cucumber salad	Vegetables and fruit
Vegetable dish (marrow family)	Vegetables and fruit
Mango (or other fruit)	Vegetables and fruit
Yoghurt	Milk and dairy

#### Advice to parents/carers:

- The meat intake by Tamil and Malayalee communities in Britain is higher than in their own countries, where meat is more expensive.
- By eating more meat the fat content of the diet is increased, especially when the meat is fried.
- Encourage people to return to more traditional vegetarian meals and to reduce meat intake.
- Traditional meat curries for children are being replaced by sausages, beef burgers and fried chicken as young children are highly influenced by media and peer pressures. These products tend to be high in fat content. They should ideally not be eaten on a daily basis but interspersed with fish, pulses, and plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables.

## Table 4

### Morning Meal

#### *Breakfast*

Traditional Tamil and Malayalee breakfasts are based on cereals and pulses.

Rice flour and urid dhal are made into batter with water. These are served with a lentil stew or spicy coconut chutney.

DISH:	MAIN FOOD GROUP
Idli:	A pure rice 'dough' steamed and eaten with sambar.
Dosa:	A crispy pancake made out of rice and urid dhal flour. A batter is made using water and the pancake is dry fried.
Idi appam:	Pure rice noodles that are steamed (string hoppers).
These foods are usually eaten with:	
Sambar:	Lentil and vegetable stew
or	
Coconut Chutney:	Vegetable and fruit. made using desiccated coconut, green or red chilli, onion, ginger, curry leaves, salt, tamarind.
Cardamom flavoured coconut milk:	sometimes sweetened for children and served with Idi appam.

**Advice for parents/carers:**

- The traditional foods used at breakfast are numerous and easy to digest. Thus they were particularly popular dishes for children and were also served at the evening meal.
- Traditional breakfast foods are time consuming to prepare and many people are having toast and breakfast cereals instead. Sugar is often added to both traditional and breakfast cereals. This practice should be discouraged.

## Table 5

### *Fruits*

Traditionally fruits were part of both communities everyday diet. They were eaten as a snack and at meal times. A popular dish was tropical fruit salad topped with honey. Fruits are increasingly being replaced with highly refined snacks such as crisps and at meal times the traditional fruit salad is served with a large helping of ice cream. Many tropical fruits are expensive and not readily available.

Most tropical fruits are high in vitamins, minerals and fibre. Mangoes, guava, kiwi fruit, pineapple and oranges are a good source of vitamin C.

#### **Popular fruits:**

Bananas, jack fruit, guava, papaya, lime, pomegranate, mangoes, pineapple, wood apple and berries although some of these are seasonal.

Traditionally pregnant women wouldn't eat papaya and pineapple as they believe that these fruits are 'hot food' and they may induce abortion.

#### **Advice to parents/carers:**

- Encourage the continued use of popular fruits such as bananas, mangoes, guava, pomegranate.
- Encourage the use of cheap, readily available fruits such as apples, and seasonal fruits such as strawberries and grapes; 3-4 servings a day if possible.
- Chopped fruits and vegetables make healthy snacks for children.
- Intake of large amounts of ice cream to be discouraged.

## Table 6

### *Herbs and Spices*

Herbs and spices play an important part in Malayalee and Tamil cooking practices. They are used to season curries and side dishes such as chutneys and to flavour traditional puddings and drinks.

Certain herbs and spices are also believed to have medicinal and life enhancing properties. They are used as a cure for some illness and at special times such as pregnancy. Care should be taken when using herbs and spices for home medication as excessive amounts can lead to stomach upsets.

Below is listed some of the more popular herbs and spices, their food use and their medicinal use.

#### **Fenugreek** - Venthayam (Tamil) Uluva (Malayalam)

Fenugreek powder is used for stomach disorders such as constipation, gastric troubles, menstruation and pre-menstrual tension and skin problems. Taking fenugreek will improve appetite. Fenugreek is also used as shampoo.

Fenugreek seeds are used for seasoning curries and side dishes.

#### **Coriander** - Kotthamalli (Tamil & Malayalam)

Pounded coriander seeds, boiled with some water and strained, with sugar and milk added is served as a substitute for coffee in some parts of India and Sri Lanka. Young babies are sometimes fed with this drink when mothers do not have enough milk, particularly in the first few days of infant life. Coriander leaves are used as spices in many food items including in soup.

#### **Saffron** - Kungkumapu (Tamil)

An expensive spice used for colouring and flavouring foods. Believed to be an aphrodisiac and good for eye sight.

#### **Garlic** - Poondu (Tamil) Velluthulli (Malayalam)

Garlic acts as an important agent and it is considered to kill germs which attack blood cells and other areas of the body. It tones up the metabolism of the body, cures urinary troubles, is a good digestive agent, reduces cholesterol, clears a blocked nose and other throat troubles, improves the functioning of the liver and is one of the best medicines for high blood pressure.

Garlic is used extensively in South India and Sri Lankan cooking. New mothers are encouraged to eat roasted garlic for the first few days after the delivery because of its healing qualities.

**Ginger - Inchi (Tamil and Malayalam)**

Essential in South Indian and Sri Lankan cooking. Fresh ginger root is normally used. Boiled ginger water with honey or sugar is used as a home remedy for coughs and colds.

**Pepper - Milaku (Tamil) Kurumilaku (Malayalam)**

In Southern India, pepper water is used as an appetiser and gives energy and strength. Mothers from this community use pepper water for curing coughs and colds.

**Turmeric - Manjal (Tamil & Malayalam)**

Turmeric is an antiseptic agent and has medicinal uses, it is said to heal wounds very quickly. The root, crushed and boiled in milk, is fed to people suffering from coughs and colds. Turmeric paste is used by women to prevent pimples and blemishes and to have clear complexions.

**Cumin Seeds - Seragam (Tamil) Jeera Gam (Malayalam)**

Jeera is one of the best digestive agents and is also reputed to cool down the body. Most of the curries contain this herb whole, crushed or in powder form. Malayalees drink the extract instead of regular water.

**Poppy Seeds - Kasa Kasa (Tamil)**

Good for flavouring and thickening meat dishes.

Other commonly used spices are:

**Cardamom - Elam (Tamil and Malayalam)****Cloves - Grampoo (Tamil & Malayalam)****Cinnamon - Karuvapettai (Tamil & Malayalam)****Mustard Seed - Kaduku (Tamil & Malayalam)****Advice to parents / carers:**

- Strong spices such as chilli, ginger and hot pepper should not be used in the cooking of meals for infants and young children.
- Advice should be sought from a doctor or suitably qualified herbalist before home remedies are given to infants and young children.
- Do not add salt to baby food as the kidneys cannot cope with it and excessive salt intake can lead to hypertension in later life.

## Table 7

### *Vegetables*

In the Tamil and Malayalee communities vegetables are an integral part of the meal. Vegetables are rarely boiled. They are braised, steamed, curried, fried or simmered in a little water with their own juice. Some vegetables are cooked in a style of bhaji and pureed.

Most South Indians believe in 'hot' and 'cold' food which is not in terms of temperature but in terms of texture. Meat is a 'hot' food and South Indians believe that eating meat may disturb the state of harmony in our digestive system. Some of the vegetables also come in to this category of 'hot' and 'cold' determined by levels of acidity, bitterness and spiciness in the vegetable. Tomato, chillies, ginger, and radish are 'hot' foods and 'cold' foods are milk, yoghurt, and most other vegetable and fruits. The 'hot' food, according to South Indians beliefs, will induce abortion and reduce lactation.

#### **Popular vegetables:**

Drumstick, ladies finger, brinjal (aubergine), pumpkin, green mango, coconut, pepper, ginger, green chillies, green pepper, curry leaves, lemon, cashew nuts, coriander, spinach, yam, plantain, snake gourd, country bean, sweet potato, karela (bitter gourd), betel, gooseberry, narathankai, papaya, sugar cane, sundaikai, karunai kilangu, rasavalli, Ilanthaipalam, bread fruit, small beans, snake beans, onion, garlic, mango, tamarind. Most of the Tamils and Malayalees eat papadam which is made out of potato flour and spices.

#### **Advice to parents/carers:**

- The tradition of serving several vegetable dishes and a fresh vegetable salad /raita with the meal should be encouraged.
- Prolonged cooking and reheating of vegetable dishes will reduce the vitamin content of the food.
- The frequent use of fried vegetable snacks should be discouraged. The amount of oil and butter used in cooking should be reduced.
- Children should be encouraged to eat leafy vegetables and fresh salads everyday.
- Raw vegetables make good finger snacks for young children.
- Wash all fruits and vegetables carefully, including ready-prepared salad vegetables.
- Keep chopping boards clean by scrubbing with detergent.

## Table 8

### *Roots*

Sweet Potato  
Potato  
Cassava  
Aram  
Karunaikilangu (Yam)  
Rasavali Kilangu (Sweet Yam)

Roots are served as part of the vegetable section of the main meal in South Indian communities. Roots are prepared and cooked in variety of ways. They are best boiled and seasoned with spices. Sweet potatoes, cassava and rasavalikilangu are also used to make a pudding with coconut milk and sugar. Karunaikilangu vegetable is not always very digestible and is best eaten at midday. Chips are becoming more popular with these communities especially with the younger generation.

#### **Advice to parents/carers:**

- Cassava should only be eaten when fresh to prevent stomach problems. It is not always easy to spot poor quality cassava.
- Chips should not be given to young children on daily basis as they are high in fat content.

## Table 9

### *Snacks and Sweets*

These are traditionally used for special occasions such as weddings, festivals and religious days but in London, due to availability and the relatively low cost, the quantity of sweets consumed has increased considerably.

#### **Drinks:**

South Indians drink boiled milk with tea and coffee. They make yoghurt (lassi) at home which is also used as the basis for drinks. Sometimes people from these communities drink coriander water and jeera water which is sweetened with sugar or honey. Commercial drinks - such as canned products and squashes are increasingly popular in this country and are causing considerable problems in terms of tooth decay.

#### **Advice to parents/carers:**

- There is very little nutritional value in drinks, snacks and sweets. The high sugar content means that they contribute mainly calories to the diet.
- Young children are suffering from very serious levels of tooth decay due to the high sugar content of their diet from commercial and traditional drinks and sweets and the frequency with which they are consumed. They should only be given water to drink or diluted pure fruit juice. It is important to understand the labelling on drinks in order to distinguish between those which contain a high sugar content and those which don't.
- For snacks, choose fresh fruits such as mango, banana and apple, natural yoghurts with fresh fruits, or toast instead of sweets, biscuits or crisps.
- Young children should not be given too many snacks as it will affect their appetite at meal times.

## Table 10

### *Pulses and Dhals*

The majority of South Indian and Sri Lankans use dhals daily. People are moving away from using traditional pulse dishes as weaning foods and replacing them with packets and tinned baby foods. Pulses and dhals are soaked and boiled. Particular care must be taken to cook kidney beans properly. Canned varieties of most types are easily available and less time consuming in their preparation. Pulses and dhals are sometimes mixed with vegetables or meat dishes e.g. lentils and spinach, kidney beans and minced meat.

The popular pulses and dhals used by the Tamils and Malayalees are:

Green gram  
Black gram  
Red gram  
Bengal gram  
Chick peas  
Black eye beans  
Peas  
Kidney beans.

#### **Advice to parents/carers:**

- Encourage the use of traditional weaning foods. If commercial baby foods are desired encourage appropriate savoury varieties.
- Do not give roasted chickpeas to young children as they can cause choking.

## Table 11

### *Fats*

Cooking in oil or ghee is practised by almost all the South Indian and Sri Lankan communities. Creating awareness about fat intake and its relationship with coronary heart disease is vital in Asian communities.

Oils are mainly from coconuts, peanuts and groundnuts, sesame seeds. Coconut contains a lot of saturated fat. Ghee is clarified butter.

#### **Advice to parents/carers:**

- Encourage the use of unsaturated fat such as corn oil, sunflower oil, soya oil instead of coconut oil and using only a small amount.
- Avoid giving children and adults deep fried food whenever possible such as:

Vadai              ) Savoury  
Murukku            ) Snacks  
Samosas/bhajis

## Table 12

- Health promotion leaflets - general
- Oral health promotion leaflets
- Information on breast feeding

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