

Mexican Culture & Foods

Country of Origin: Mexico

Primary Language(s): Spanish, Nahuatl, English, Mayan

Percent of Iowa's Population: 6%

Where are we from?



Red, white, and green are the colors of the national army in Mexico. The central emblem is the Mexican coat of arms, based on the Aztec symbol for Tenochtitlan (now Mexico City), the center of the Aztec empire. It recalls the legend of an eagle sitting on a cactus while devouring a serpent that signaled to the Aztecs where to found their city, Tenochtitlan.^[1]¹¹



What is our Level of Education?

In 2017, 63% of Latinos age 25 and older had at least a high school education and approximately 13% had a bachelor's degree or higher.² However, nearly half of Hispanics in the US are functionally illiterate.⁹ Medicaid beneficiaries, which constitutes a large number of WIC participants, have an average reading level of 5th grade.¹⁰

Historical Background

Mexican culture is a mixture of influences handed down by numerous past civilizations. The Mayans who lived in Mexico centuries ago are one of the most well-known civilizations, as they invented the calendar and writing system. The Aztecs were another civilization prominent in Mexico. Religion played a central role in both Mayan's and Aztec's lives. In 1519 Hernán Cortés, a Spanish conquistador, conquered the Aztec empire and renamed it New Spain. After this, Catholicism influence and power grew. This led to a clash between colonists born in Spain and Mexico, as Mexican colonists wanted equal power. Spain's influence weakened on Mexico when Napoleón Bonaparte occupied Spain in 1808. Mexico gained their independence in 1810. The battle at the Alamo and the Mexican-American War both occurred over Mexico's desire to annex Texas in the mid 1800's. The Mexican Revolution then took place in 1910 which was arose from unequal distribution of wealth due to corrupt leadership. Unfortunately, today the distribution of wealth remains imbalanced and the country's economy is fragile. However, Hispanics remain proud of their heritage and country.⁷

Traditions, Customs, & Taboos

Family, including extended family, is central to Hispanics.³ It is not unusual for many generations to live together under one roof.⁷ Hispanics tend to focus their attention others rather than themselves. A large percentage of Hispanics are Catholic and Protestant, and some follow Christianity.^{3,5} They have a clear division of gender roles. Additionally, they believe in healing foods, teas and rituals.³ Food and sharing food with others are important aspects of culture. Foods have strong cultural meanings, they represent a way of welcoming people. According to Hispanics, sharing food lets others know they are like family, and that they are important. Even in families with low economic resources, food is an essential element of being social.⁶

Holidays & Celebrations

Hispanics celebrate many holidays of Christian origin including Easter Week and Christmas. On December 12th Mexico honors its patron saint, The Virgin of Guadalupe. Day of the Dead occurs on November 1st to remember the lives of the deceased while celebrating the continuation of life. Skull-shaped candies and sweet breads are popular during this holiday. Cinco de Mayo, another popular holiday, celebrates the Mexican victory over the French. Quinceañeras, a Hispanic celebration, honor a young woman's 15th birthday.⁷ National Hispanic Heritage Month is celebrated in the US in September, which coincides with national Independence days in 7 Latino countries.⁵

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Health Disparities

Hispanics have higher rates of diabetes, chronic liver disease, obesity, uncontrolled high blood pressure, and cirrhosis. Additionally, listeriosis, which is an infection caused by eating food contaminated with the bacterium *Listeria Monocytogenes*, is more prevalent among Hispanics. People with weakened immune systems including pregnant women and newborns are at a higher risk. Queso fresco and queso blanco, both popular cheeses among Hispanics, should be avoided by pregnant women to decrease the risk of this disease.^{3,4}

Traditional Foods & Meal Patterns

Three main staples in Hispanic cuisine include corn, beans, and squash.⁷ Other traditional foods include breads, rice, and flour and corn tortillas. Common vegetables in the Hispanic diet consist of chiles, avocados, plantains, squash, tomatoes, and yucca. Common fruits include guava, mangos, oranges, prickly pear, tamarind, starfruit, pineapple, passion fruit, and papaya.³ Popular Hispanic dishes include enchiladas, stuffed chili peppers, menudo (veggie & beef stew), and seafood dishes. For dessert dulce de leche (caramelized milk) is well-known, and to drink agua fresca or horchata.⁷ Hispanics typically eat 3 meals a day, with lunch and dinner being most important.³

Considerations for WIC

- In Mexico, people work around their eating schedule and typically eat on what some here would call a “delayed” schedule. Breakfast is often between 7:00am and 10:00am, Lunch between 1:30pm and 4:00pm and dinner between 8:00pm and 9:00pm. In Mexico, lunch is the main meal and tends to be a leisurely meal.¹²
- Popular breakfast items include *tropical fruits, toast, tortillas with eggs and yogurt*. Lunch often includes an appetizer, a soup or *salad*, and the main course with *rice and/or beans* and hot tortillas. Dinner often consists of soup or tacos.¹²
- For Hispanics, popular WIC food items to make sure they are aware they can purchase include those mentioned above as well as lima beans, and fresh fruits and vegetables that are native to their home country like tomatoes, tomatillos, jicama, squash, chiles, avocado, chayote, limes, lemons, lychee, papaya, mango, plantains, and guava.¹⁴
- It’s important to coordinate outreach activities as well as referrals for services through, and to, established and trusted organizations.¹³ The individual participant’s needs and comfort level should also be accounted for before making referrals to other services. While the matriarch often determines when a family member needs medical attention, the male head still gives the permission.¹³
- Many Hispanics combine Western medicine with traditional practices, like drinking herbal or spiced teas or seeking care from relatives and community members, especially among those who are uninsured or underinsured. Some medications that can only be obtained with a prescription in the US can be purchased easily and for a lower cost from Mexican pharmacies, so some families make regular trips to Mexico to purchase their medications.¹³
- Food, family, and celebrations are intertwined in Hispanic culture. In order for behavioral interventions to be successful, it may need to target the entire family.

Why Did We Come to Iowa?

Emmanuel and “Happy” Benitas were the first Hispanics to settle in Iowa in 1870. They lived in Dubuque and left Mexico due to economic hardship and unfair distribution of wealth, which is still common today. Farming is a popular job in Iowa among Hispanics. Many live here and send money home to Mexico to supplement family member’s income.⁸

Where Are We Living?

Over 40,000 Latinos live in Polk county. Other counties with a large Hispanic population include Crawford, Buena Vista, Marshall, Muscatine, and Woodbury.²

Latinos as a percent of the total population in Iowa’s counties: 2017



Where Are We Working?

In 2017, 27% of Iowa Latinos worked in the production, transportation, and material moving occupations. Approximately 23% of Latinos worked in the service industry, including food preparation and serving related occupations. A large number of Latinos work in the management, science, business, natural resources, maintenance, and construction occupations.²

