

Healthy eating, Bengali Cuisine



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The Bengali regional cuisine in Bangladesh, the Indian state of West Bengal and parts of the states of Tripura and Assam, include fish and lentils served with rice as a core staple. Bengali chefs display their greatest creativity when preparing fish, which they cook with yogurt, coconut milk or mustard seeds, and serve steamed, fried or made into curries, cutlets and biryani.

Fish is a great foundation for a healthy diet, but the benefits are often lost when fish is fried or cooked in too much fat. Other Bengali favourites such as luchis, puris and deep-fried kochuris, as well as sweets such as sandesh, rosogulla or rasmalai that are prepared with paneer, cream, ghee and sugar, create a diet high in fat and are not heart healthy.

Eating a healthy diet that is lower in fat, especially saturated and trans fat, and being active most days is the best way to protect your heart health. Follow these healthy eating guidelines.



Eat more vegetables and fruit Include plenty of vegetables and fruit throughout your day and in the meals you prepare.

- Add finely diced vegetables to cutlets, alu chops (potato croquettes), koftas, pulaos, curries, raitas, salads, and dals.
- Include vegetables such as carrots, red or orange peppers, celery, cauliflower, yellow squash or peas when preparing alu (potato) curry, fish kalia, chicken curry or jhorshay fish (fish with mustard seed paste) and khichuri (rice and lentil dish).
- Serve sliced fruit such as peaches, nectarines, pears, oranges or berries with mishti doi (sweet yogurt) or sandesh (milk-based dessert) or folded into payesh (rice and milk pudding), raitas or salads.



Eat whole grains Make at least half your grain servings as whole grains.

- Substitute brown basmati for white, in khichuri, pulao and biryani.
- Use whole grain flour to make flatbreads.
- Add barley to soupy dishes like macher jhol (fish curry) to cook along with the sauce.

Milk and alternatives

Because there is less milk used in Bengali cuisine, and primarily only in desserts, it is important to include lower fat milk (2%, 1% or skim) or fortified soy beverage in your diet either by drinking it each day or using lower fat milk products such as yogurt or cheese.

Meat and alternatives Choose lean cuts of meat prepared with little or no added fat or salt.

- Include meat alternatives such as beans, dal, lentils and tofu often in your meals. Use skin on whole lentils for preparing dal curries.
- Try substituting tofu for paneer in dishes such as chaner dalna, chana kalia or shahi chaner.
- Eat at least two servings of fish each week prepared in a low-fat manner such as baking. Cold water fish (such as char, herring, mackerel, rainbow trout, salmon or sardines) are especially high in heart-healthy fats.

Choose healthy fats and cooking methods Use a small amount of healthier oils such as canola, olive or soybean. Include only 2 to 3 tbsp (30 to 45 mL) of unsaturated fats each day, including cooking oil, salad dressing, margarine and mayonnaise.

- It is unhealthy to use a lot of ghee in the preparation of dishes such as rice pulao, biryani, kalia (a rich preparation of fish, meat or vegetables using a lot of oil and ghee with a sautéed sauce of onions and ginger), rezala (a rich meat curry with cream, nuts and ghee), dalna (vegetable curry cooked with ghee & yogurt), korma or ghonto (meat and fish head cooked with assorted veggies cooked with coconut and ghee).
- Avoid full-fat coconut milk or cream in dishes such as pulao, biryani, narkel chingri (shrimp with coconut) or chingri malai (creamy shrimp curry). Try low-fat evaporated milk or low-fat yogurt instead.
- If coconut milk is an essential part of a dish, use light coconut milk. Try making traditional sweets without any coconut at all to create new healthful flavours.
- Prepare karela (bitter gourd) steamed or lightly stir-fried instead of deep frying.
- Stir-fry vegetables, chops, fish cutlets, fish, beguni and bhajee instead of deep-frying them. Use a small amount of cooking spray in a non-stick frying pan.
- Poach shrimp or crab in the flavourful curry sauce is just as delicious, healthy and time saving instead of deep-frying beforehand.
- Masala pastes can be cooked using small amounts of oil instead of ghee or vegetable ghee.
- Stir-fry potatoes for aloor dum (baby potato curry) or alu bhajee (potato fritters) or cauliflower for alu phulkopi dalna (potato and cauliflower curry) or eggplant for begun bhajee (eggplant).
- Use a non-stick skillet with a tablespoon of canola oil when preparing meat curries, instead of using the bhuna technique where the spice paste and meat are fried in a lot of ghee.

Make healthy choices when eating out

- Avoid fried appetizers such as singhara, samosa, peyajoo (lentil & onion fritters), beguni (eggplant fritters) and pokora.
- Choose dishes such as macher jhol instead of rich dishes such as kalia, fish fry, fish cutlets or bhajees.
- Limit the amount of red meat such as mutton, lamb or beef, especially in rich preparations like korma, rezala or kalia.
- Choose fresh fruit instead of rich desserts such as rossogulla, ras malai, sandesh, cham cham or payesh.

Chingri Malai

Makes 4 servings

This dish is traditionally made with coconut milk and cream. Our healthy version combines vegetables with shrimp, uses light coconut milk and fat-free yogurt. By omitting the traditional step of frying the shrimp first, this recipe also uses very little oil. Use any vegetables that are in season.

- 15 mL (1 tbsp) oil
- 1 mL (¼ tsp) onion seeds (kalonji)
- 0.6 cm (¼ inch) stick cinnamon
- 2 whole cloves
- 2 green cardamom
- 1 small onion (65 g), finely chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, chopped
- 5 mL (1 tsp) minced ginger
- 2 green chillies, slit down the middle
- 250 mL (1 cup) diced green and yellow zucchini (65 g each)
- 250 mL (1 cup) broccoli florets (65 g)
- 5 grape tomatoes, halved
- 125 mL (½ cup) light coconut milk
- 125 mL (½ cup) fat-free yogurt
- 125 mL (½ cup) water
- 2 mL (½ tsp) turmeric
- 1 mL (¼ tsp) cayenne pepper
- 300 g (2/3 lb) peeled and deveined shrimp

1. Warm oil in non-stick skillet over medium high heat. Add onion seeds, cinnamon, cloves and cardamom. Sauté 30 sec. Add onions, garlic, ginger and chillies. Sauté 5 min until softened. Add all vegetables, sauté 5 min.
2. Reduce heat to medium, add coconut milk, yogurt, water, turmeric and cayenne. Cover and cook 5 min. Add shrimp, mix gently. Cook covered, stirring occasionally for 5 min or until shrimp are cooked through.

Nutrition Information per serving (¾ cup/175 mL)

Calories 156, Protein 18g, Fat 6g, Saturated Fat 2g, Cholesterol 142mg, Carbohydrate 8g, Fibre 2g, Sodium 188mg, Potassium 459mg

Masala fish stir-fry

Makes 2 servings

A traditional fish fry is usually deep-fried. This healthy version is stir-fried with cooking spray while retaining all of its traditional flavours and crispness.

- 2 large pieces, 6 oz (171 g) each, tilapia fillets
- 2 cloves garlic, finely grated
- 1.3 cm (½ inch) piece ginger (15 g), finely grated
- 2 mL (½ tsp) turmeric
- 15 mL (1 tbsp) lemon juice
- 2 slices whole grain flax bread, cubed into 1-inch pieces
- 2 mL (½ tsp) cayenne pepper
- 2 mL (½ tsp) garam masala
- 2 mL (½ tsp) ground cumin
- Cooking spray for pan-frying fish

1. Place fish in single layer on large tray or platter. Mix together garlic, ginger, turmeric and lemon juice. Spread evenly on both sides of fish. Marinate 10 min.
2. Meanwhile, process bread to fine crumbs in food processor. Transfer to bowl, add cayenne, garam masala and ground cumin. Mix well. Sprinkle all of breadcrumb mixture evenly over both sides of fish, patting it in gently to hold it in place.
3. Warm large non-stick frying pan, sprayed lightly with cooking spray, over medium heat. Place fish in single layer in pan, being careful not to loosen the breadcrumb topping. Cook 7-8 min on each side, turning fish carefully once, until it is cooked through and topping is crisp.

Nutrition Information per serving (1 fillet)

Calories 256, Protein 38g, Fat 5g, Saturated Fat 2g, Cholesterol 75mg, Carbohydrate 15g, Fibre 3g, Sodium 186mg, Potassium 645 mg