

If you've ever been Japan, you may have noticed that it's really hard to find an obese Japanese person. In the United States, it's quite a different story. The rate of obesity among adults in America is [on average around 30%](#) whereas the Japan obesity rate is only 3.5%. Japan isn't perfect, it does have its share of health problems, but what makes the weight of people in these two countries so different?

At first, I was thinking about things like... Japanese people drink a lot of green tea and they get a decent amount of fermented foods like kimuchi or nattou which is great for the gut microbiome. But, in this video I want to focus on a very simple yet key point about Japan. The [food environment](#) is drastically different from the US. As of 2017 there's over [243,000 Fast food establishments in America](#). There's only [6,169 establishments in Japan](#), meaning per person, there's about *15 times* more fast food restaurants in America.

Then again, in Japan, fast food, fried food, chips, chocolate, candy, soda, and not so healthy things are still available wherever you go. But there's a huge variety of equally convenient reasonably healthy food. Let's say I'm the average busy person in the states who would *like* to be healthy but doesn't have time to cook at home. What's for breakfast? Most people's options are limited to things like a McGriddle with Hashbrowns and coffee, or maybe an Egg and processed Cheese sandwich with tater tots at Dunkin' Donuts, or some pancakes at Denny's if you have more time. Surely some people have more healthy options, but I'm trying to think of what most people are going to have access to.

What's a quick breakfast in Japan? While there's more than 6000 fast food establishments in Japan, there's also 5000 rice bowl establishments. The big ones are Yoshinoya, Sukiya and Matsuya. And for 4 dollars at Sukiya, for breakfast you can get Plain Rice, Miso Soup with Seaweed, an Egg, baked fish, green onions and a small potato salad comes with it. If I'm extra hungry maybe I'll add some kimchi - spicy pickled vegetables, fermented

soybeans and stewed beef for 4 more dollars.

Or, you can put together a reasonably healthy meal from a *convenience store*. At a Japanese convenience store I can get a rice ball which is just rice, salmon and salt... a small salad, or a package of sushi, or a thing of fish with miso... Or some soup. I was pretty impressed with how little junk is in this: it's basically just vegetables, pork and fish broth. There's a bunch of different foods like this - here's what I can get for under 10 dollars USD. The ingredients aren't too bad - I recognize everything in here, there's not much sugar added, and they're decently fresh without preservatives - You can tell because the expiration date is just a few days after I bought it. At about 700 calories and 47 grams of protein it should be pretty filling as well.

Compare this to what's available in American convenience stores - they're limited to fried foods sitting under heat lamps or foods loaded with trans fat, sugar, preservatives and unhealthy additives. If you're lucky you might be able to get a package of nuts with nothing added.

So the items in Japanese convenience stores are not **top** quality health foods, but they're not bad. This is big because practically *everyone has access* to these places, convenience stores like these are *everywhere*. Japan has about 55,000 convenience stores meaning there's about 10 times *more* convenience stores per square kilometer in Japan compared to America. For most, these places are in walking distance.

I understand that of course there are healthy restaurants here and there in America and you can make a really healthy meal with ingredients from the supermarket. But when it comes to cheap, convenient and quick food - it's almost always quite unhealthy. In Japan, unhealthy choices are conveniently available, but a variety of inexpensive *reasonably healthy* choices are also conveniently available. For a quick lunch, I can go to burger king, or right next door I can get some sushi. I can get a Hamburger and some Popcorn at ...Vandalism cafe (great naming), or I can go next

door to Matsuya and get a bowl of spicy tofu soup with a bit of beef, green onion and cabbage, some pork, a soft boiled egg, some mustard spinach, rice and there's free pickled ginger to go with it.

And of course, there are many healthier non-chain places that offer many different types of cuisine.

And this variety is very important. It's going to be much easier to stick to healthier options if you aren't getting bored of having to eat the same things at the same places over and over.

Even if you're going out to drink with friends at dinner time, there's still a variety of good food choices. The standard place to drink at is an *izakaya* - at 10,000 establishments, there's almost twice as many *izakayas* as there are fast food places in Japan. Replacing fast food for alcohol is not a good strategy, but let's see what one of the common izakaya chains have to offer in the way of food.

This particular place I went to isn't the best example because it's almost twice as expensive as some of the cheaper izakayas. But, most Izakayas aren't too pricey and have a bunch of decent choices like this.

Let me point out one more time that there's of course **much** better quality food than what you get at convenience stores, rice bowl chains or izakayas and this is not what most Japanese people eat on a daily basis. I'm not really recommending these places either - Most Japanese people wouldn't think of these places as "healthy". But, this isn't about optimal health. I just mean to point out that even someone who puts minimal effort into being healthy can get some reasonable quality meals out of these very convenient places.

By the way, what's everyone drinking with and between meals? In America, more often than not it's soda, considering a survey of 80 countries found

that America comes in at [rank #1](#) for soda consumption at 170 liters purchased per person in 2011. Japan came in at rank #56 at 32 liters per person. In Japan most places serve tea with your meal for free and it's harder to purchase massive quantities of soda - there's no comically large big gulps, I've never seen these kinds of packs of coke here, and Japan has the smallest "large" cup size at McDonald's - An American medium size drink is bigger than a Japanese large. Another factor to thank for keeping people's soda intake low is again: variety. What's interesting is despite Japan drinking 5 times less soda than America, soda is available in vending machines everywhere in Japan. There's 5.52 million vending machines, meaning there is a vending machine for every 23 people in Japan - that's the highest vending machine per capita on the planet. What's in these vending machines? Why don't we take a look at this vending machine I came across on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere in Hakone. Among other things, They have black coffee, six different types of unsweetened tea and water & and you can get these hot or cold and in a big size or small size. A typical american vending machine offers 13 varieties of drink, the only non-sweet one being water.

So convenience and variety - simple, but it makes a difference. It's easier to pick the healthy choices when they are just as easy and convenient as the unhealthier choices. Now this is by no means the full story on Japan and health, but I think these are two key factors. I'll be doing another video on some of the many other things that contribute to health in Japan, so if there's a particular point you want to hear discussed leave a comment below.