

Isabelle Bernstein

Athens High School

Athens, Ohio

Samoa, Dietary Diseases

Bringing Nutritious Food Back to Samoa

Samoa is located in the Pacific with a population of 208,853 people. The climate is tropical with two seasons, rainy and dry (CIA, 2025). The average Samoan family has 5 members who are mostly overweight, and at least one member has a Non-Communicable Disease (NCD) such as diabetes and hypertension (Samoa Bureau of Statistics, 2018). In 2018, the National Samoan Household Income and Expenditure Survey found that 1 in 4 Samoans lacked access to nutritious food (Samoa Bureau of Statistics, 2018). As Singh (2016) reported, since the 1970s, Samoans have suffered from extensive diet and weight-related issues, and Samoa has one of the highest rates of obesity and Type 2 diabetes in the world.

Samoa faces food insecurity issues as the lack of access to healthy and nutritious food leads to NCDs. Epidemiologist Stephen McGarvey suggested that the obesity epidemic in Samoa may be related to the loss of the traditional diet: people's lifestyle and food changed as cheap imported food became more and more available (McGarvey & Baker, 1979; Seidon et. al, 2016). Traditionally, the Samoan diet comprises fresh fish, taro, yams, fruit, and coconut. To combat the prevalence of NCDs in Samoa, a solution must be found to help Samoans regain access to healthy food.

Imported unhealthy food, such as canned fish, hotdogs, and ramen, is cheaper than local healthy food like fresh fish and taro. Most Western countries have isolated food deserts without access to fresh food. However, the everyday diet in the islands of Samoa is full of ultra-

processed food, as if everyone were living in one large food desert (Hillyer, n.d.). Food deserts severely hurt communities, as the lack of nutritious food “has a lasting impact on local community health,” worsened economic issues, and ultimately led to the high prevalence of obesity and NCDs (Dickson, 2023). Non-communicable diseases in Samoa are still very high, as Samasoni-Pele (2021) quoted from the Samoa NCD Risk Factors STEP report:” NCDs are high and increasing with overweight at 84.7%, obesity at 63.1%, diabetes at 24.8% and hypertension at 24.5%” (Samasoni-Pele, 2021, para 3). Proper access to nutrition can drastically reduce NCDs (NCD Alliance). The high rise in NCDs can be directly traced to the extremely high rates of obesity affecting 63% of the adult population and more than 50% of children being overweight (WHO, 2023).

In the 1950s, US poultry firms to offset waste began dumping turkey tails into the small island nation of Samoa, creating a high demand for fatty meat (Carolan, 2017). Turkey tails, which were unknown in Samoa before the 1950s, became part of the Samoan diet. By 2007, the average Samoan was consuming more than 44 pounds of turkey tail a year, 3 times that of Americans' annual turkey consumption (Carolan, 2017). While Samoa banned the importation of turkey tail in 2007, the legacy of imported unhealthy food remains and still affects the island. The new modern reality is that as the local market doesn't bring much profit, the traditional Samoan diet composed of fish and taro became too expensive for the average Samoan to maintain due to short supply, with one taro costing more than \$2 US dollars (Samoa Observer/Pacnews, 2024).

The modernization of the Samoan diet has led to unfavorable outcomes and a strong reliance on canned foods and purchased goods (Bindon, 1981). With Samoan agriculture focusing on export and factory fishing taking over, cheap canned fish has been increasingly eaten

and taro, a former Samoan staple, reached high prices. Samoans have substituted ultra-processed foods over the traditional diet based on fresh local food (Samoa Observer, 2024). Samoan food production and system was restructured in its modernizing process, with little diversity of local vendors.

A potential solution would be to put the means of production in the Samoan communities. 80% of land in Samoa is owned by individual villages and communities though only 4.1% of land is arable (World Bank). The government could provide a small subsidy to every Samoan family with demonstrable skills and willingness to grow local crops to ensure ultimate success. The goal of this solution is not to make villages and villagers produce their sole food source or as a source of income but to give the average Samoan the agency and ability to access fresh and nutritious food. Community gardens are also essential to encourage community sharing and fresh vegetable consumption is key to alleviating nutrition concerns and an important part of the diet for NCD patients (Hardin, 2021). Various community garden projects have been set up to provide nutritious pathways for Samoans (Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research, 2025). During the Covid-19, community gardens in Samoa helped people “make ends meet” as well as develop farming capabilities (“BAT Samoa,” 2020). The impact is two-fold: having the average Samoan take control of their health while providing affordable, accessible, and nutritious options.

Community involvement is vital. Having community members including the elders and the young work alongside agriculture experts from intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations or Food and Agriculture Organization would help the local communities re-learn how to best maintain the land to grow crops and other food-producing natural resources. Samoan society is community-oriented and tribal. Extended families live together, and the elders are the

leaders of communities and villages. This goal is achievable as villages own 80% of the land, along with the average Samoan farm being 2 acres. Youth will also be promoted in taking an interest in agricultural roles and be allowed agency in the growing process. Hope these efforts will over time alleviate the lack of access to nutritious food in Samoa.

The proposed solution will decrease NCDs and uplift the Samoan community. By introducing and encouraging more local food production, Samoans receive access to nutritious foods. Implementing Samoa's traditional diet through local production will allow Samoans to both reconnect with themselves and reconnect with proper nutrition. Through local involvement, Samoans will be given the resources to start fixing their health.

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