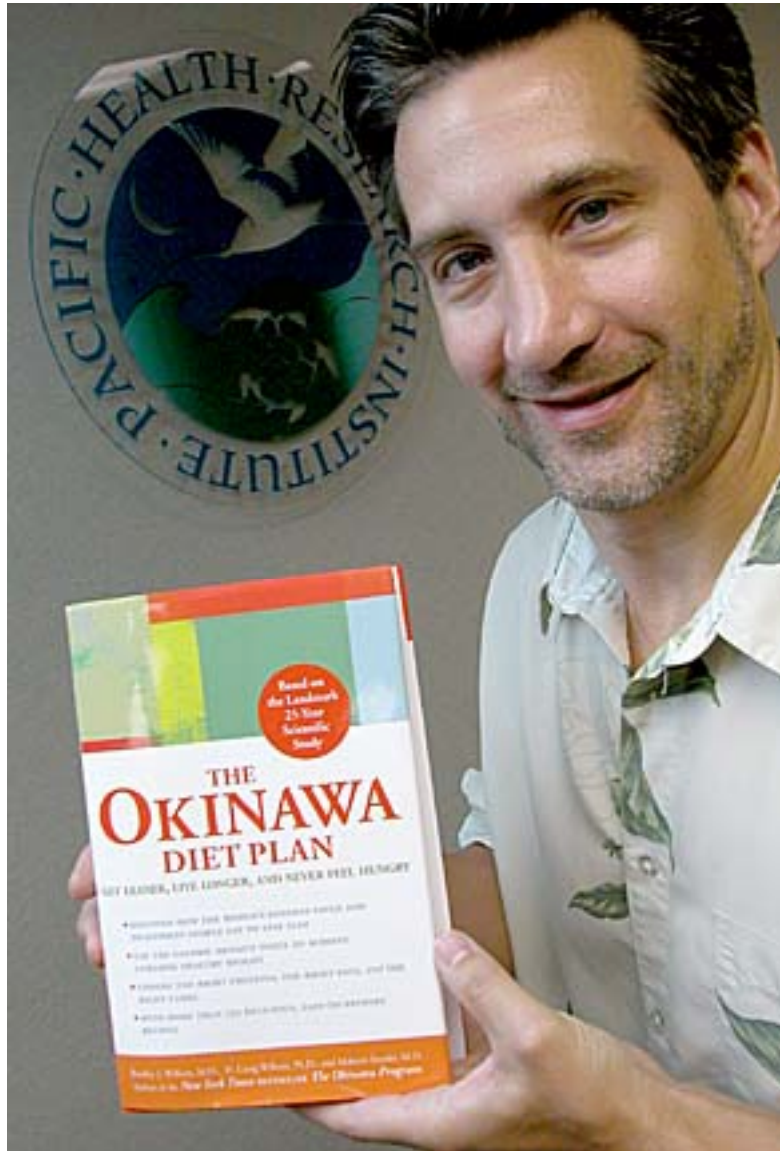


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CRAIG T. KOJIMA / CKOJIMA@STARBULLETIN.COM  
Bradley Willcox says the book is meant for people who want to achieve healthy weight loss and keep it off for life.

# Book reveals diet secrets of Okinawa

Geriatric researchers say Okinawans offer fascinating insights for long, healthy living

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By Helen Altonn  
[haltonn@starbulletin.com](mailto:haltonn@starbulletin.com)

Researchers who discovered why Okinawans live long, disease-free lives are sharing the secrets in a new book, "The Okinawa Diet Plan: Get Leaner, Live Longer, and Never Feel Hungry."

"It is really meant for people who have been struggling with weight and bounced from one diet to another," said Dr. Bradley J. Willcox of the Pacific Health Research Institute at the University of Hawaii. "And it's meant for people who want to achieve healthy weight loss and keep the weight off for life."

He said an analysis of dietary data from a 28-year study of Okinawan centenarians shows a key to healthy aging is maintaining healthy lifelong weight with diet and exercise.

"What was fascinating ... was Okinawans who ate a more traditional diet never gained weight with age."

Willcox, a former geriatrics fellow at Harvard Medical School, co-wrote the book with his twin brother, Dr. D. Craig Willcox, medical anthropologist at Okinawa Prefectural University, and Dr. Makoto Suzuki, Okinawa International University gerontologist.

Suzuki led a study by the three that began in 1976 to determine why Okinawa has the highest number of documented centenarians. The result was "The Okinawa Program," a 2001 New York Times best seller.

Bradley Willcox said Okinawans are "the only human example of a naturally calorically restricted population, not because they're not eating enough food. They're eating three to four pounds of food a day."

But the plant-heavy Okinawan diet contains about half the caloric density, or calories per gram of food, than the American diet, he said.

"What's interesting, despite the plethora of low-carbohydrate diets on the market promising quick weight loss, Okinawans are eating a diet higher in carbohydrates -- but they're good carbohydrates ... the kind that don't cause a rapid rise in blood sugar."

They include low-fat, water-rich and high-fiber foods, such as sweet potatoes, vegetables, whole-grains, fruits, soy foods and other beans and fish, with limited amounts of lean meats.

Okinawans also use many tasty spices because of the East Asian influence, Willcox said, calling it Japanese food "with salsa."

"When you emphasize the right carbohydrates and right fats and avoid some of these trendy low-carbohydrate diets, what you lose rather than water is fat," he said.

He said he dropped from 195 pounds to his high school weight of 127 on the Okinawan diet during the past two years.

After joining the Pacific Health Research Institute in October, he said he was excited to find an Okinawan sweet potato in the Straub Clinic & Hospital cafeteria.

Because of their low-calorie diet and physical activity, the average Okinawan lives to be 82 or 83, about five or six years longer than most Americans, Willcox said.

Okinawa also has 39.5 centenarians per 100,000 people compared with 10 per 100,000 in America, he said. Willcox said no one really knows the number of centenarians in America because the data is based on the census, which is highly unreliable about people more than 100 years old.

Okinawans also live most of their lives free of heart disease, cancer, diabetes, obesity and other chronic diseases, he said.

That was illustrated in the first autopsy of a female centenarian in Okinawa in a study pending publication in the *Journal of Gerontology*, Willcox said.

Most impressive was that her coronary arteries were free of plaque, suggesting her heart could have lasted decades longer, he said. Also, 90 percent of her kidney cells were intact whereas people reaching their 80s typically lose nearly half of them, he said.

She did a lot of physical work as a farmer most of her life and walked and did traditional dance, a good activity for strength and flexibility, Willcox said.

She had 97 healthy years, living independently, then began to decline and died of pneumonia, he said.

He said Okinawans have 80 percent to 90 percent less risk for heart disease than Americans, 30 percent lower risk for cancer and 80 percent to 90 percent lower risk for breast and prostate cancer. His brother's wife, a public health nurse, has seen only two breast cancer cases in 10 years, he noted.

"We're always looking for a diet in America or lifestyle ways to reduce our risk for these age-related diseases, especially women's diseases. We're already there. We've got it. If we could find a pill to reduce breast cancer 80 percent, everybody would be taking it."

Willcox said there are similarities between the Okinawa Diet and Dr. Terry Shintani's "very effective" Waianae diet. However, he said the Okinawan diet "is more liberal in terms of healthy fats and proteins from animal sources." Willcox and the Pacific Health Research Institute recently received a \$700,000 five-year grant from the National Institute on Aging for studies on "Genetics of Exceptional Survival in Okinawan-Japanese Centenarians."

The researchers plan to compare Okinawans age 70 and older in Hawaii and in Okinawa, looking at genetics, differences in diet, physical activity and other lifestyle measures. Hawaii has an estimated 50,000 Okinawan residents.

The Pacific Health Research Institute worked hard to get Willcox here because of opportunities for research based on the Okinawa experience, said Dr. David Curb, chief executive, president and medical director.

Curb is among Honolulu researchers who began health studies in 1965 with 8,006 Japanese-American men on Oahu. "There are all kinds of possibilities for extending that and doing studies comparing Okinawans here and in Okinawa and Japanese in Japan," he said.

"It appears that when Japanese move here in general they become healthier and live longer than they do in Japan," Curb said. "Most people would think westernization is bad, but it seems like the people here who live a lifestyle between East and West live longer than people in Japan."

Most of the men remaining in the Honolulu study have not reached their 100th birthdays, he said, "but we do know the people we're looking at in general are healthier and living longer than comparable groups in the United States, and we think that's comparable to older Okinawans as well."

Food tasting also puts diet book on the menu

"The Okinawa Diet Plan" will be released with a sampling of healthy Okinawan foods from 6 to 9 p.m. May 15 at the Hawaii Okinawa Center.

Tickets cost \$40, with all proceeds donated to the Hawaii United Okinawa Association. The cost includes a copy of the book. It contains more than 150 recipes created by Okinawan and American chefs, including local chef Roy Yamaguchi.

Three eating tracks are presented applying Okinawan diet principles -- Eastern, an East-West blend and a Western approach "for people who can't stomach soy," said Dr. Bradley Willcox.

He and his brother, Dr. D. Craig Willcox, authors of the book with Dr. Makoto Suzuki, will present findings of their

research and answer questions at the book-release and tasting event.

For ticket information, call 676-5400.