

Japanese Annual Events

New Year

New Year (*oshogatsu*) begins with the greeting, *Akemashite omedeto gozaimasu*.

The Japanese believe that their ancestral spirits in whom they have revered since time immemorial and the god of the New Year visit at New Year, so families and communities hold various events for them. The period from year-end until the New Year is the longest holiday for many people in Japan.

The moment Christmas is over, everyone is frantic with preparations for welcoming the New Year. Since New Year's Day begins with the number one, people believed from ancient times that everything is reborn in the earthly world. So, at the end of the year, they clear the dust that accumulated over the year by cleaning their entire homes. They hang a *shimenawa* over doors, place *kadomatsu* at the entrances, and create an altar with *kagamimochi*, sake, dried persimmons and other offerings. However, with urbanization and the increase in nuclear families, households have simplified these traditions by not decking their homes with traditional decorations.

At midnight on New Year's Eve (*omisoka*), people gather at the local temple to hear the 108 bells (*joya-no-kane*) ring to rid people of their worldly desires. Most people eat *toshikoshi-soba* to pray for continued happiness in their homes for as long as the noodles are long.

Families gather on January 1st to eat *osechi* traditional New Year food and visit the shrines and temples to pray for the New Year (*hatsumode*). Everyone enjoys receiving New Year greeting cards (*nengajo*) from their relatives and friends.

《New Year Decorations》

The gods who protect each household are believed to descend from heaven on January 1st, so homes are decorated with special New Year decorations to welcome them.

Shimenawa



A twisted rice-straw rope, which symbolizes a place where gods are received, is hung on the gate or over the entrance to cleanse the home and welcome the god of the New Year. Many people in recent years also hang them on their cars to prevent accidents.

Kadomatsu



From ancient times, the Japanese believed that gods lived in evergreens, such as the pine, so they stood branches from these holy trees outside their homes for the god of the New Year to descend to earth.

Kagami-mochi



This flat, round rice-cake that resembles a hand mirror is the seat of the god of the New Year. The mirror is a sacred object used since ancient times in Shinto rituals and is considered the place the gods dwell. The god of the New Year is the deity of grain, so a rice cake made from grain is where his soul dwells. Kelp, fern leaves and a mandarin orange are stacked atop the large and small rice cakes as symbols of happiness, longevity, and prosperity for the household for generations to come.

Kagami-biraki



Once the New Year celebrations are over, the *kagami-mochi* is broken and used in soups, such as *shiruko* and *ozoni*. People believe it is better to break the rice cake into smaller pieces by hand than with a knife, because it is the seat of the god.

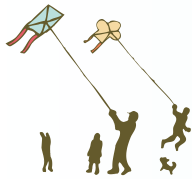
Osechi



This cuisine was served at court banquets during the five traditional seasonal festivals in the Heian Period (794-1185). Various products harvested over the year were offered to the gods to pray for a bountiful harvest and good health, and used to make *osechi*. Today, these festivals have disappeared, but the word *osechi* remains. New Year food, such as rice cakes, developed as non-perishable dishes prepared at year-end to lighten the household chores and allow everyone to relax over the first three days in the New Year and. The food is packed into a nest of four lacquered boxes, but fewer tiers are used today.

《New Year Games》

Try some traditional games played by children over generations at New Year.



Takoage

Children fly kites, which differ in shape and construction to Western kites, by tensing or loosening the string and relying on the wind's strength and direction to make it fly. A simple kite can be made from disposable chopsticks and a plastic garbage bag.



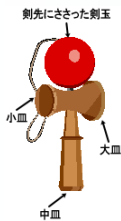
Komamawashi

String is wound around a top and pulled to make it spin. Tops come in various shapes and sizes and can be enjoyed in many ways. A simple top can be made using a plastic cap from a container by stabbing a toothpick through its center.



Hanetsuki

A wooden paddle is used to hit a shuttlecock in this game similar to badminton. A popular Japanese souvenir, the paddle is decorated with a doll on one side.



Kendama

Jerk the ball attached to the stock by string and catch it in one of the three cups or impale it on the spike. Each trick has its own name.



Fukuwarai

Wearing a blindfold, everyone takes turns to place eyes, nose, mouth and eyebrows on an outline of a face on a piece of paper to make funny face.



Kakizome

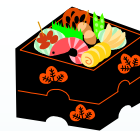
Children--and adults, too--write words associated with New Year, such as *oshogatsu* (New Year) and *hinode* (first sunrise), or New Year's resolutions in calligraphy on white Japanese writing paper using a brush and ink.

January



January 1st: New Year's Day

People pray for fortune in the coming year at Shinto shrines or Buddhist temples on this first day of the New Year, and feast on *osechi* and *ozoni* with rice cakes.



January 7th: Nanakusa

People eat a seven-vegetable (*nanakusa*) rice gruel in the morning of January 7th, *jinjitsu-no-sekku*.



2nd Monday in January: Coming of Age Day

Young males and females who turned 20 the previous year turn out in their finery to attend ceremonies held in towns and cities across the country to celebrate their coming of age.

Note: The date varies from year to year.

February



February 3rd: Setsubun

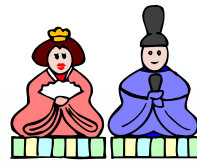
People throw roasted soy beans from a wooden box out their front door, saying “*Oni wa soto* (Demons out),” then turn inside their home and scatter the beans, saying “*Fuku wa uchi* (Fortune in).” Later, they eat their age in soy beans plus one for good health in the coming year.

February 14th: St Valentine’s Day

During the third century, Roman Emperor Claudius declared it illegal for men to marry, so he could strengthen his army. But Valentine, a priest, married people in secret. For this, he was executed and became the patron saint of lovers. It is unclear when Japan adopted this tradition. On this day, women give men who are close to their hearts chocolate and declare their love. Their gift giving also extends to include men with whom they interact often but have no romantic attachment, such as their co-workers, fathers and brothers. The chocolate section in department stores are bustling with women in early February.



March



March 3rd: Momo-no-sekku

Now called *hina-matsuri* (doll festival), families with girls display their tiered doll sets, eat seasonal delicacies and drink white sake together.

March 14th: White Day

Men who received chocolates on St Valentine’s Day return the gift with white chocolate or candy.

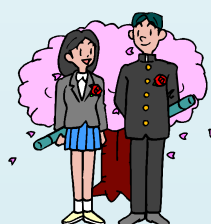


March 20th: Shunbun-no-hi

People tend their family graves on the vernal equinox, also known as *haru-no-ohigan*.
Note: The date varies from year to year.

March 31st: End of School Year

School graduation ceremonies are held in March, the end of the school and fiscal year.



April

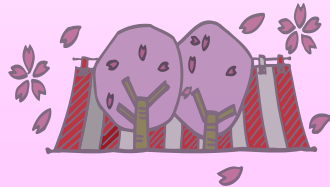
April 1st: Start of the Fiscal Year

Schools and companies hold their entrance ceremonies during April, the beginning of the fiscal and school year in Japan.



Early April: Hanami

Japanese enjoy the flowers and celebrate spring by holding flower-viewing (*hanami*) parties under the blooming cherry blossom trees.

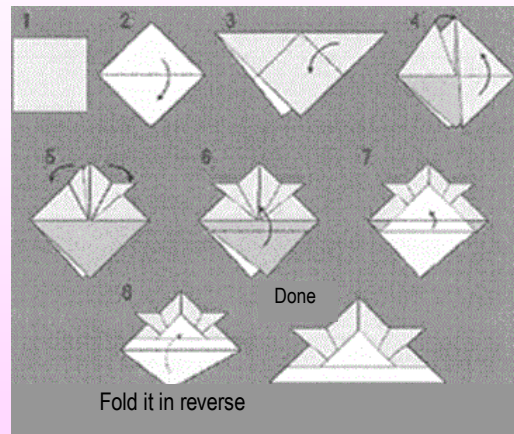


May

May 5th: Tango-no-sekku

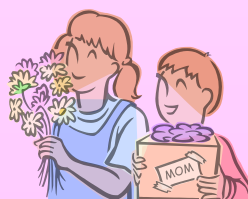
This boy's festival is similar to the girl's festival on March 3rd. Renamed Children's Day, this national holiday was established in 1948 as a day to respect children's personalities, celebrate their happiness and express gratitude towards mothers. As Children's Day approaches, households with boys fly carp windsocks (*koinobori*) on their roofs or balconies for their children's health, success, and longevity. In Chinese legend, a carp swims the Yellow River upstream and becomes a dragon upon climbing the waterfall. Households also display seasonal dolls and samurai helmets.

How to fold a helmet →



2nd Sunday in May: Mother's Day

Mother's Day is the day we thank our mothers for their hard work. Japan and other countries celebrate this day on the second Sunday in March, but the origins and date vary around the world.



June

3rd Sunday in June: Father's Day

Following on from Mother's Day, a month earlier, Father's Day is the day we thank our fathers.



July

July 7th: Tanabata

Japanese call the river-like star cluster in the night sky, Heaven's River. Altair and Vega who are separated by this river are allowed to meet but once a year on the evening of July 7th. This festival, which celebrates these two stars and originated in China to pray for improved needlework, entered Japan in the 6th century and spread to the general public in the 15th century. Today, people write their wishes on thin paper strips of five different colors, tie them onto bamboo grass and release them into the rivers and seas to pray for their wishes come true.



July 15th: Ochugen

In mid-summer, Japanese send gifts, called *ochugen*, by July 15th to their superiors and others to whom they are indebted. Gifts sent later are called *shochu-mimai* (summer greetings).

August

August 13th - 16th: Obon

During the period from August 13th through 16th, Japanese return to their hometowns to visit their ancestral graves and hold services for their ancestors, who they believe come back to this world on the 13th and return to the other world on the 16th. Local communities also hold *bon-odori* dancing to please their ancestors' souls.



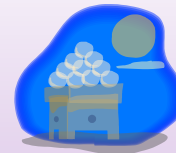
September

Mid-September: Jugoya

Moon viewing events are held on August 15th in the lunar calendar, mid-September in the Gregorian calendar. The moon on this day is called *chushu-no-meigetsu* (harvest moon), *jugoya*, and *imo-meigetsu*. People gaze at the moon and offer dumplings, rice cakes (moon cakes in China), silver grass, and taro.

3rd Monday in September: Keiro-no-hi

Respect for the Aged Day celebrates the longevity of the elderly.



September 23rd: Shubun-no-hi

People tend their family graves on the autumnal equinox, also known as *aki-no-ohigan*, and eat *ohagi* bean cakes. Note: The date varies from year to year.

October

2nd Monday in October: Tai'iku-no-hi

Various sports-related events are held on this public holiday established to promote sports and a healthy lifestyle.



Mid-October: Jusanya

Japan also has the custom of moon viewing on September 13th in the lunar calendar, mid-October in the Gregorian calendar. The moon on this day is referred to as *jusanya*, *ato-no-tsuki*, and *kuri-meigetsu*. On this night, people offer dumplings, chestnuts and *edamame*. In some local customs, it was despised to only view the moon on one occasion; hence, the saying, “if you enjoyed *jugoya*, you must also enjoy *jusanya*.” China does not have this custom, only Japan.

November

November 15th: Shichi-go-san

Three year-old boys and girls, five year-old boys and seven-year old girls visit the shrine to celebrate their growth. Boys once wore a *hakama* skirt and *haori* coat, and girls wore kimono. Many children today wear Western clothes, but photo studios rent traditional clothing for commemorative *shichi-go-san* photographs.



December

December 13th: Kotohajime

Preparations for welcoming the New Year begin on this day. Many years ago, people would go into the mountain to gather the wood necessary to make the *kadomatsu* and to cook the *ozoni*.

Mid-December: Oseibo

At the end of the year, Japanese once again send gifts, called *oseibo*, to their superiors and others to whom they are indebted.



December 22nd: Toji

Winter solstice is the shortest day of the year in the northern hemisphere. Japanese have always believed that taking a *yuzu* citrus bath on this day prevents colds. People in some regions also eat pumpkin or the jelly-like *konnyaku*.

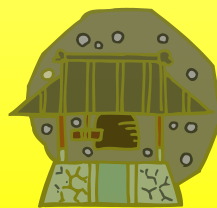
December 25th: Christmas

Streets decked with Christmas illumination, in December, give towns a glittering atmosphere. Various events are held across the country for fun, despite the religious meaning of Christmas. Like children everywhere, Japanese children look forward to eating Christmas sponge cake and receiving presents.



December 31st: Omisoka

On the last day of the year, the Japanese eat long, thin *toshikoshi-soba* noodles to pray for a long life. The bells at temples ring 108 times (*joya-no-kane*) starting just before midnight to rid people of their so-called 108 worldly desires and welcome the New Year.



Japan has many more annual events to enjoy.

* Edited from published *Mimitaro* articles.