**New Year**

Fire and water festivals (for purification) are common throughout the month of January. The Shinto religion also lays emphasis on the renewal of time: so many “firsts” are celebrated in the newly-begun year*.*

**January 1st:** Hatsumode or hatsumairi (First prayer visit). Early in the morning of New Year’s Day, many people pay their first visit of the year to their local Shinto shrine or a Buddhist temple. Women and girls often wear beautiful kimono for the occasion.
**January 2nd:** Kakizome. First writing (calligraphy ) of the year.
**January 4th:** Goyo Hajime. First business. Some traditional shops open for business after the New Year break. During the first few days of the year, people often visit their close friends and relatives to greet the new year together. Special foods eaten at New Year include: O-toso (sweet sake flavoured with cassia bark, herbs and spices), and mochi (sticky rice cake) eaten on their own or in o-zoni vegetable broth.

**Setsubun**

**February 2nd-3rd**

The first day of spring by the ancient lunar calendar. The festival is marked throughout the country with maki-maki, or bean throwing, and shouts of “Fuku wa uchi, oni wa soto!” (Fortune in! Demons out!). Good places to see this in Tokyo are the Zojoji Temple (behind Tokyo Tower) and Senso-ji Temple in Asakusa, which also puts on a classical dance. In Kyoto, Mibu-dera has Setsubun Kyogen performances from 1pm, repeated eight times, on both days; Rokuharamitsu-ji has a demon chase and bean-throwing on the afternoon of the 3rd; Yoshida Jinja is famous for its demon chase at 7pm on the 2nd, and a fire festival at 11pm on the 3rd.

**Hina Matsuri**

**March 3rd**

The Doll Festival, or momo-no-sekku (“peach blossom fete”). Ceremonial dolls – often valuable family heirlooms – are displayed in the best room in the house. Such dolls, clothed in ancient formal costumes, are often bought on the birth of a girl, or given by relatives or friends. In some areas, the festival maintains its original theme of exorcism: symbolic dolls are loaded up in boats and sent out to sea, with the prayer that all bad luck, impurities and evil spirits should be transferred from girls to the dolls which are floating away. Peach blossom, flowering at this time, is also displayed as a symbol of feminine qualities, and of marital bliss. Special foods eaten at this festival include hishi-mochi (diamond-shaped rice cakes), shiro-zake (ground rice and sweet sake)and sekihan (rice boiled with red beans).

**Birth of Buddha**

**8th April**

The birthday of Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, is celebrated throughout Japan on 8 April. Every important Buddhist temple observes the ceremony of kambutsu-e, or “baptism ceremony”. Sweet tea is poured from tiny ladles over a small statue of the infant Buddha. The statue is placed in a hana-mido (miniature, temporary temple decorated with flowers). Little children dressed in festival robes walk in procession through the temple yard.

**Childrens (boys) festival**

**5th May**

Kodomo-no-hi, but also known as shobu-no-sekku and tango-no-sekku (from the iris (shobu) plant). Its origins lie in the distribution of medicinal irises as protection against illness, over time it has become a day to pray for healthy boys. Families fly carp banners – one for each son – supposedly because this fish has the energy and power to fight its way up swift-running streams; because of its strength and determination to overcome all obstacles, it is held up as a good example to growing boys of ambition, strength and perseverance.

**Tanabata Matsuri**

**7th July**

The Star (or Weaver) Festival. The story goes that two stars in love, Kengyu (Altair, or the Cowherd star) and Shokujo (Vega, or the Weaver star), are reunited by a bridge of magpies spanning the Milky Way. The popular custom of praying to the Cowherd for a good harvest and to the Weaver for skill in weaving has been observed in Japan for centuries in connection with the Star Festival. Young people celebrate this festival by writing down their wishes on strips of paper and hanging them on bamboo branches set up in the garden. This custom has become widespread even in school, where young pupils hope to acquire skill in handwriting by praying to the star for success in their studies.

**Bon or o-bon**

**Middle of the seventh lunar month, 13th-15th July**

**(celebrated 13-15 August in certain areas)** Likened to the Christian All Souls’ Day, it is sometimes called the “Festival of Souls”, the “Festival of the Dead”, or the “Festival of Lanterns”. The spirits of the dead, never far away, return to their earthly homes for a brief visit. Houses are cleaned for the occasion, and family graves carefully tended. Paper lanterns and incense are burned in the graveyards; at night all during the festival, lanterns shed a subdued light throughout the house. On the 15th, the last day, okuri-dango (farewell rice dumplings) are offered to the spirit-guests to cheer their departure to the Meido – the mysterious celestial world of the dead. The Bon Odori (Bon dance) is held on evenings around the 15th. These dances nowadays are part of festivals held on commercial areas in cities and towns.

**Shichi-go-san**

**15th November**

Literally the seven (shichi) five (go) three (san) festival. Girls aged three and seven, and boys aged five, are taken to a shrine in appreciation of the good health given to them by the guardian gods.

**New Year’s Eve**

**31st December**

Namahage: in the Oga peninsula, men masked as frightening demons go from house to house asking: “Are there any good-for-nothing children round here?”
Okera Mairi, Yakusa Shrine, Kyoto: a sacred fire is kindled in the shrine’s precincts. It is believed that the fire will bring happiness to those cooking their first meal with the embers of the fire, and visitors are encouraged to take some of the embers home.

 KAYNAK: <https://www.japanspecialist.co.uk/travel-tips/traditional-festivals/>

List of national holidays

Although the word matsuri is always translated as 'festival', some festivals and holidays are more correctly included in the **nenchu gyoji** or annual events originally observed by the Imperial court. These observances are mostly of Chinese or Buddhist origin but as most Japanese don't really consider their religious significance, they also don't distinguish them from matsuri. The dates of some holidays, such as **Adult's Day** in January, have been moved to a fixed Monday in order to have guaranteed three-day weekends. The government made some changes in 2000 in an effort to stimulate the sluggish economy. Some of the more important days are: **New Year's Day**, Adult's Day (Seijin no Hi), **Doll Festival** (Hina Matsuri) on March 3rd, **Golden Week** in May, **Bon Festival** (Obon) on July 13-15th (August in some areas) and **New Year's Eve** . The birthday of the current emperor is always a national holiday, as is the birthday of the late Emperor Showa.



The first sunrise of the New Year appears behind Mt. Fuji. Symbolism overload!

In recent years, Christmas has become a big - at least in the commercial sense - event in Japan. Japanese families and colleagues will gather together, take pictures and celebrate the commercial holiday. But the **New Year** and **Obon** in summer are the biggest events in the annual calendar. Families are expected to gather at the family home - no matter how scattered the members may be - to honour their ancestors.



Boy in traditional matsuri costume



Hundreds of Koinobori fill the sky in May



Mother and daughter at Shichi-go-san

Toward the end of the year, homes will be decorated with kadomatsu (bamboo and pine decorations) and whatever animal symbolizes the coming year in the traditional zodiac and people will send hundreds of postcards to friends and family. The cards often include a lottery number, a big money spinner for the post office.

On the night of New Year's Eve or the next day, people visit their local shrine or temple (in Tokyo, the number of visitors to Meiji Shrine around New Year alone is in the millions). There are usually no wild New Year countdown celebrations, but at temples across the country a bell is struck 108 times. The number symbolizes the Buddhist belief that there are 108 human sins or worldly desires and the rining of the bell - 107 times before midnight and once after - will rid them of their sins of the previous year.

For a break from cooking over the holidays, elaborate "osechi-ryori" dishes are bought or prepared for New Year and they contain all sorts of foods thought to be auspicious, such as mochi and kazunoko.

**Seijin no Hi** celebrates people coming of age at 20. On the second Monday of January (until 2000, it was January 15th), 20-year olds dress up and visit a shrine or attend a municipal ceremony to honour their reaching adulthood. It is a good opportunity to see hordes of young people in their finest traditional dress. Many young men wear kimono too but the majority tend to go for suits these days. Recent years have seen the day often marred by rowdy behavior and a general lack of respect for the formal aspects of the day.

**Setsubun** on February 3rd or 4th marks the beginning of spring. The word literally means "the spliting of the seasons". People throw beans at someone wearing a mask and representing a demon and chant **'Oni wa soto, fuku wa uchi'** or 'Out with the demons, in with good luck!' Often celebrities visit major shrines to throw out beans and other goodies to large crowds.

The focal point for the Hina Matsuri or **Doll Festival** is a display of dolls representing the emperor, empress and their court in formal dress. Most homes with young girls will have a display, from simple dolls and cards to elaborate setups costing hundreds of thousands of yen. **Children's Day** is actually a celebration for boys, corresponding to the Doll Festival for girls. Warrior dolls or mock samurai armor are displyed and **koinobori** or carp streamers are flown by families with boys (the carp is considered a symbol of success). On both days a special meal is eaten. Children's Day falls during the Golden Week holiday, which along with New Year and Obon is one of the busiest holiday periods throughout the country, with millions of Japanese also traveling abroad. .

At Obon, the souls of the dead are said to return and so people visit and clean the family grave and light a path to the house. Although Obon is traditionally in July, most people take their annual summer 'Obon' vacation in August, making it the busiest and most expensive holiday season.

**7-5-3 Festival** (Shichi-go-san) on November 15th, 7 and 3-year old girls and 5-year old boys (Shichi-go-san is Japanese for the numbers 7, 5 and 3) are dressed up in their best kimono - although these days suits are more common for the boys - and brought to the shrine to pray for their future. Originally, this ritual was based on the fact that Japanese believe certain ages to be prone to bad luck. Children were not considered fully formed until age seven. This event is also one of several times a year when photo studios make their biggest profits as parents and grandparents splash out lots of money for family albums.

The full list of national holidays is as follows:

* January 1 - **New Year's Day** (Ganjitsu)
* The second Monday in January - **Adult's Day** (Seijin-no hi)
* February 11 - **National Founding Day** (Kenkoku Kinen-no hi)
* March 20 or 21 - **Vernal Equinox** (Shunbun-no hi)
* April 29 - **Showa Day** (Showa-no hi)
* May 3 - **Constitution Memorial Day** (Kenpou Kinenbi)
* May 4 - **Greenery Day** (Midori-no hi)
* May 5 - **Children's Day** (Kodomo-no hi)
* The third Monday in July - **Marine Day** or **Ocean Day** (Umi-no hi)
* August 11 - **Mountain Day** (Yama-no hi)
* The third Monday in September - **Respect-for-the-Aged Day** (Keirou-no hi)
* September 23 or 24 - **Autumnal Equinox** (Shuubun-no hi)
* The second Monday in October - **Health/Sports Day** (Taiiku-no hi)
* November 3 - **Culture Day** (Bunka-no hi)
* November 23 - **Labor Thanksgiving Day** (Kinrou Kansha-no hi)
* December 23 - **Emperor's Birthday** (Tennou Tanjoubi)

When a national holiday falls on Sunday, the next Monday becomes a holiday.