

## January: Oshogatsu (New Year's Day)



For Japanese people, New Year's Day is the most important holiday of the year. Historically, *Oshogatsu* meant the first month of the lunar calendar, when families paid their respects to their ancestors and prayed for successful crops. Nowadays, however, people celebrate *Oshogatsu* in the first week of January simply as the start of the new year.

During *Oshogatsu* traditional pine ornaments called *kadomatsu* are set outside the door to welcome ancestral spirits. Indoors, special offerings of ricecakes called *Kagamimochi* are placed in an alcove. Spiced sake, soup with ricecakes, and special holiday foods called *osechi* are served. People exchange New Year's cards (*nengajo*) to wish each other good luck. They also visit each other. Many pay their first visit of the year, to temples and shrines. Women, most of whom ordinarily wear Western clothing, put their hair up and wear the traditional *kimono*.

Children are given small gifts of money (*otoshidama*) from parents and relatives, and enjoy playing traditional games for the season, such as kite-flying, top-spinning, Japanese badminton, and card games.

On January 7th, some people eat rice porridge with seven kinds of spring herbs, which was believed in ancient times to prevent and cure illnesses.

The ancient Chinese produced a Zodiac system for indicating time and directions by using names of twelve animals. Today in Japan, it is mainly used in reference to the year. For example, the years 1960, 1972, 1984, and 1996 are all Mouse years. The symbols and images of the animals are used for designs for New Year's cards. It is also used in fortune telling (much the same way as horoscope) as it categorizes people according to the year they were born and the animal after which that year was named.

| Animal   | Year |      |      |      |
|----------|------|------|------|------|
|          | 1960 | 1972 | 1984 | 1996 |
| Mouse    | 1960 | 1972 | 1984 | 1996 |
| Cow      | 1961 | 1973 | 1985 | 1997 |
| Tiger    | 1962 | 1974 | 1986 | 1998 |
| Rabbit   | 1963 | 1975 | 1987 | 1999 |
| Dragon   | 1964 | 1976 | 1988 | 2000 |
| Snake    | 1965 | 1977 | 1989 | 2001 |
| Horse    | 1966 | 1978 | 1990 | 2002 |
| Sheep    | 1967 | 1979 | 1991 | 2003 |
| Monkey   | 1968 | 1980 | 1992 | 2004 |
| Rooster  | 1969 | 1981 | 1993 | 2005 |
| Dog      | 1970 | 1982 | 1994 | 2006 |
| Wild Pig | 1971 | 1983 | 1995 | 2007 |