

New Dietary Guidelines to consider stage of life and specific health issues

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) are in the process of developing the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines (<http://tinyurl.com/lgosfad>), once known as the Food Pyramid and now known as MyPlate. On February 21, 2019 the two agencies announced the names of the “20 nationally recognized scientists [chosen] to serve on the 2020 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee.” These 20 people will review the scientific evidence and report their findings to the secretaries of the two departments. The final guidelines will be issued jointly by USDA and HHS in 2020.

Most of the time some degree of controversy surrounds the announcement of the revised Dietary Guidelines. We expect that next year’s announcement will be no different. When the guidelines recommend “more of this and less of that” farmers are going to be affected because they produce the ingredients that go into the foods we eat. Recommendations about sugar, meat, and milk intake can have an impact on what consumers purchase and thus what farmers produce.

In a real way, the USDA has to walk a tight rope in developing the guidelines. On the one hand, in issuing dietary guidelines they have a stake in the health of every resident of the US. On the other, they oversee programs for the various agricultural commodities, including sugar, meat, and milk. The involvement of HHS helps in this regard, because the focus there is clearly on health issues.

The other complaint that has been used to diminish the importance of the guidelines is that the recommendations change with each new revision. But in some ways that is the point. As our knowledge of food, diet, and human physiology change—as the result of the most recent research—the dietary guidelines need to change as well. While we have come a long way in our understanding of human nutrition; we still have much to learn.

The “Topics and Scientific Questions to be Examined by the 2020 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee” are organized into two lists. The information is the same on both lists with List A organized according to life stages and List B organized by topics and questions to reduce redundancy. These lists can be obtained on the USDA Dietary Guidelines webpage.

One of the major changes coming in the new guidelines is a focus on changing nutritional requirements depending on the lifestage a person is in: infants and toddlers from birth to 24 months; children and adolescents, ages 2-18 years old; adults, ages 19-64 years old; pregnant and lactating women; and adults 65 and over. While it is not directly mentioned, one assumes that the members of the Advisory Committee also factor in the different nutritional requirement of men and women.

Among the specific issues that will be looked at are dietary patterns, beverages, added sugars, types of dietary fats, seafoods, and frequency of eating. Each of these has a set of issues or questions that will be examined by the committee. For instance, the committee has been asked to look at the relationship between various dietary patterns—for example: “Mediterranean-style, Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH), vegetarian/vegan, low-carbohydrate diets, and high-fat diets—and a list of topics that range from risk of overweight and obesity to risk of type 2 diabetes, and impact on neurocognitive health.

Another issue included in the list of issues the committee is being asked to examine reflects the changing pattern of life in the US. With families going in different directions each day (work, school, sports, music, other youth and adult organizations) the assumption behind

MyPlate that people gather around a table and eat three meals a day may not be accurate. The committee has been asked to examine the “relationship between the frequency of eating (such as meals per day, snacking, and fasting) at each stage of life and: 1) achieving nutrient and food group recommendations; 2) growth, size, body composition, and risk of overweight and obesity; 3) risk of cardiovascular disease; 4) risk of type 2 diabetes; and 5) all-cause mortality.”

The USDA emphasizes that “there are multiple opportunities for public participation before, during, and after the Committee’s review of the evidence. Ways to participate include reviewing regularly updated information on [USDA’s] website, attending public meetings, and providing public comments, including opportunities for written and oral comments, once the Advisory Committee has started its work.” Those interested in participating in the development of the Dietary Guidelines can sign up to the USDA listserv at <http://tinyurl.com/y5febory>.

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