

Latest dietary guidelines differ by life stage

The United States Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services “Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2020-2025” (DGA) (www.dietaryguidelines.gov) was released just before Christmas, gaining minimal attention amidst the holiday bustle and the almost daily post-election drama. The first guidelines were issued in 1980 and subsequent updates have been issued every 5 years since.

Despite the argument by some that it should have recommended against the consumption of alcohol and added sugar in the human diet (<https://tinyurl.com/y6yq6sna>), we find that, overall, the analysis and recommendations deserve serious attention if, as a nation, we want to see a reduction in nutrition-related health conditions (overweight and obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, and bone health and muscle strength) and their associated personal and financial costs.

The most significant change from earlier versions with their broad recommendations for the whole population is the inclusion of specific recommendations by life stage: infants and toddlers, children and adolescents, adults, women who are pregnant or lactating, and older adults.

The two department secretaries write, “Each stage of life is distinct and has unique needs that affect health and disease risk. Early food preferences influence food and beverage choices later. And the science has evolved to focus on the importance of a healthy dietary pattern over time. The science also shows it’s never too late to start and maintain a healthy dietary pattern, which can yield health benefits in the short term and cumulatively over years.”

The general guidelines continue the use of MyPlate first introduced in the 2015-2020 DGA. Half of the plate consists of fruits and vegetables with the focus on whole fruits, a variety of vegetables, and more vegetables than fruits.

The other half of the plate is focused on the consumption of grains and proteins. The recommendation is to make half of the grains consumed whole grains and to maintain variety in the protein sources including dried beans and peas which can count as either a protein or a vegetable.

The glass at the side of the plate is for milk with the recommendation that people move to low-fat or fat-free dairy milk or yogurt (or lactose-free dairy or fortified soy versions).

The 2020 DGA also recommends that people restrict their consumption of saturated fats.

Items included in the 2020 DGA MyPlate recommendations should account for at least 85 percent of the calories an individual consumes in a day. The remaining calories can come from other sources including sugars and saturated fats.

One of the interesting graphics in the publication shows the difference in calorie count between a 3 oz. patty of 97 percent lean ground beef and an 80 percent lean patty. The 97 percent patty contains 122 calories compared to 209 calories for the 80 percent patty. The comparison for baked cod versus breaded fried cod was 99 calories and 230 calories. The most dramatic comparison was between a 12 ounce espresso with fat-free milk (110 calories) and a full-fat mocha (290 calories).

The 2020 DGA makes four general recommendations:

1. Follow a healthy dietary pattern at every life stage;
2. Customize and enjoy nutrient-dense food and beverage choice to reflect personal preferences, cultural traditions, and budgetary considerations;
3. Focus on meeting food group needs with nutrient-dense foods and beverages, and stay within calorie limits; and

4. Limit foods and beverages higher in added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium and limit alcoholic beverages.

We would guess that we are like most of our readers. We should make some changes in our eating habits that are associated with improved health outcomes.

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