

Five things nutrition experts want you to know about new federal dietary guidelines

January 29 2021, by Tate Gunnerson



New federal dietary guidelines encourage Americans to focus more on

eating healthy throughout life, to be flexible in their eating patterns and to cut down on empty calories.

The recommendations, released every five years by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services, are designed to promote nutrition and prevent chronic disease. The guidance influences [food](#) and nutrition programs at the federal, state and local levels, and impacts how [food companies](#) formulate their products.

"The high prevalence of diabetes, cancer and heart disease could be reduced if people ate better," said Judith Wylie-Rosett, a professor of health promotion and nutrition research at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York City. "Chronic diseases are often related to obesity and poor nutritional habits."

Here are five important takeaways from nutrition experts:

There's flexibility to customize

The recommendations emphasize that [healthy eating](#) comes in many forms and can be adjusted to fit cultural traditions, personal tastes and different budgets.

Swapping out red meat, for example, doesn't mean people have to force down their least-favorite source of protein.

"You can go with a plant-based diet or eat seafood, poultry and legumes rather than [red meat](#)," said Penny Kris-Etherton, a distinguished professor of nutrition at Pennsylvania State University in University Park.

The new focus on customization based on culture, budget and personal preference is a departure from the guideline's past one-size-fits-all

approach to healthy eating.

"Tailoring the message engages people in making choices, which means it is more likely they will be able to make changes," Wylie-Rosett said.

"In the past, guidelines have been aimed at the majority, and we are moving toward a minority-majority population. We need to respect and address the needs of the diversity within our society."

Limit empty calories

For the first time, the guidelines say children under 2 should completely avoid foods and drinks with added sugars, such as cake, ice cream and fruit drinks.

But the guidance for added sugars otherwise remains unchanged, despite a report last summer from the [dietary guidelines](#) advisory committee that called for everyone ages 2 and older to cut consumption to 6% of daily calories, down from the currently recommended 10%.

Similarly, the guidelines stuck with previous advice on alcohol – no more than two drinks per day for men and one for women in adults who choose to drink. The advisory committee had suggested men limit alcohol to only one drink a day.

Alcohol is not recommended for adults who don't already drink, and pregnant women should avoid it completely, the guidelines say.

"Sugar and alcohol don't have any nutrition whatsoever," Kris-Etherton said. Sugar is often added to a variety of foods where you might not expect it, including bottled spaghetti sauce, ketchup, breads and cereals. It's important to read nutrition labels and select foods accordingly, she said.

It's never too late (or too early)

The guidelines for the first time outline recommendations "by life stage, from birth through older adulthood." For example, babies should exclusively have breast milk for the first six months of life. If breastfeeding isn't an option, babies should be fed an iron-fortified infant formula.

In addition, the guidelines recognize that people 60 and older have slightly different nutritional needs. For instance, vitamin B12 deficiencies are more common in older people because the ability to absorb the nutrient naturally decreases with age, but also can decrease because of certain medications. So, older adults are urged to eat the recommended amount of protein, a common source of B12, as well as B12-fortified foods.

Look at the big picture

Foods are not eaten in isolation but in a wide array of combinations over time – a dietary pattern.

The idea, Wylie-Rosett said, is to eat a variety of colorful fruits and vegetables rather than focusing on specific nutrients. For example, beta carotene is a plant pigment and antioxidant found in carrots and other vegetables.

"There are over 600 carotenoids, but the only one we talk about is beta carotene," she said. "We've created our nutrient guides to avoid deficiencies, (but) what we need to do is focus on optimal health."

To that end, the guidelines recommend people vary their source of protein, fill half their plate with a mix of different fruits and vegetables,

select low-fat dairy or soy alternatives, and avoid foods high in sugar, saturated fat and sodium.

To help people get started, the USDA offers MyPlate Plan, an online tool that makes recommendations based on age, sex, height, weight and activity levels.

'Make every bite count'

The theme of the 164-page guideline is to "make every bite count." That means avoiding high-calorie junk foods such as potato chips, cookies and calorie-laden (and nutrient-poor) fast foods in favor of healthier options, Kris-Etherton said.

Think whole grains, fruits and vegetables; vegetable oils instead of butter or coconut oil; and low-fat dairy and leaner proteins.

The guidelines offer several ideas for making dishes healthier. For example, shave calories off a burrito bowl by using reduced-fat cheese and adding vegetables in place of some rice and beans. Choose brown rice instead of white rice to add fiber, which will help you feel full and more likely to skip dessert.

"When you fill up on all the right foods, you don't want the other foods, because you're full and satisfied," Kris-Etherton said.

And the benefits multiply, Kris-Etherton said. People will likely sleep better, be less stressed and have more energy to exercise.

"It just goes on and on," she said. "Good nutrition really helps with overall well-being."

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Citation: Five things nutrition experts want you to know about new federal dietary guidelines (2021, January 29) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-01-nutrition-experts-federal-dietary-guidelines.html>

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