

US dietary guidelines focus on curtailing sugar

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New dietary recommendations call for Americans to limit sugar intake to 10 percent of daily calories.

The latest word from an advisory panel that helps form U.S. dietary guidelines confirms what nutritionists have been saying in recent years: Cholesterol-rich foods like eggs and shrimp aren't as bad for us as previously believed, but sugars definitely should be curtailed.

The fact that too much sugar, particularly delivered through sugar-sweetened beverages, can lead to weight gain and health problems may not be groundbreaking. But the panel's call for Americans to limit sugar intake to 10 percent of daily calories (about 12 teaspoons a day for adults) is news. On average, Americans consume 22 to 30 teaspoons a day, and half of them come from soda, juices and other [sugary drinks](#).

Rutgers Today talked with Peggy Policastro, a Rutgers University

registered dietician/nutrition specialist and director of the Healthy Dining Team, about her take on the recommended guidelines aimed at fighting rising obesity in the United States, which affects one-third of adults and 17 percent of children, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

For so many years, we were advised to reduce fat and cholesterol intake, and now the focus has turned to sugar. Why are the new recommended guidelines the ones to follow?

Policastro: It's been known for a while that it's not dietary cholesterol that affects [blood cholesterol levels](#). The new thing is the emphasis on sugar. We've quantified how much we are eating. Before, we never said only have this much sugar. I do agree with the take on sugar. Looking at our obesogenic environment, it appears that sugar-sweetened beverages are a big culprit. This helps give parents an understanding when looking at sweetened cereals, drinks and snacks – even something as simple as fruit chews – that the word "fruit" can be confusing.

Would a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages, as the advisory panel recommended, be a good way to help change sugar-consumption habits?

Policastro: I do believe it would address a certain population, but it would not affect everyone. It's a panacea. People with money would still buy [sugar-sweetened beverages]. I'd want to avoid sugar-added drinks becoming a status symbol among the younger population: "Oh, your family can afford it, but mine can't."

Despite its specific 10 percent recommendation on

daily calories from sugar, the panel makes a point of a saying it would like Americans to focus less on individual nutrients and more on overall eating habits. Do you agree?

Policastro: With nutrition, you have to look at everything under the big picture. Our largest message is, eat a variety of foods and watch portions. If you follow those two things, you'll have a good diet. Some things never change: Eat more fruits and vegetables – that advice has been around for a very long time. But how do we make healthy choices the choice? Changing the environment to get people to make the healthy choice is the work we are doing at Rutgers. People choose the easiest, or most salient, choice. If we make that the healthy choice, that's the one they will go for.

For average folks who don't have food choices thoughtfully presented to them as students in the Rutgers dining halls do, what can we do to make better choices when eating out to help create healthier, long-term habits?

Policastro: Be mindful. If you're going to a buffet, for example, check everything out before going for the first thing you see. Take pauses to assess how hungry you are versus trying to fit everything on your plate. Remember that water may not be on the menu but it is available everywhere. Sometimes [sugar](#)-laden beverages take up more real estate on soda fountains, but there is usually water there, too.

Provided by Rutgers University

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