What are the latest diet and nutrition guidelines?

New guidelines recommend focusing on healthy foods but don't restrict added sugars or alcohol as much as some experts had hoped.

January 5, 2021 By Liz Highleyman

On December 29, the federal government released its Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020–2025. Produced by the United States Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services, the guidelines are updated every five years based on the latest scientific evidence.

Noting that more than half of American adults have one or more diet-related chronic diseases, the authors state that "just about everyone, no matter their health status, can benefit from shifting food and beverage choices to better support healthy dietary patterns."

A decade ago, the federal government scrapped the old food pyramid that recommended numbers of servings per day from each food group, replacing it with a more flexible approach. The latest revision—the first to provide guidance by life stage, from birth through old age—recommends developing a customized healthy eating plan by starting with personal preferences, incorporating cultural traditions and considering budget constraints.

The guidelines hold few surprises about what to eat: more fruits and vegetables, whole grains, plant-based proteins (for example, beans and nuts), low-fat dairy products, fish and unprocessed lean meat and poultry. Nutrient-rich foods and drinks should make up about 85% of daily calories, with little leeway for empty calories. The recommendation to limit foods and beverages high in added sugars, saturated fat and sodium is also expected.

The report emphasizes the health benefits of exclusive breast feeding for at least the first six months of life, and it recommends that children should have potentially allergenic foods, such as peanuts and eggs, introduced into their diet during the first year to reduce the risk of developing allergies.

But many experts are disappointed that the guidelines do not incorporate a scientific advisory committee's recommendation to lower consumption of added sugars in food and drinks from 10% to 6% of daily calories. The new guidelines do recommend, however, that children under age 2

should not consume any added sugars.

Along with candy and desserts, sweetened beverages are a major source of added sugars. Sugar contributes to obesity, which raises the risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, at least 13 types of cancer and more severe COVID-19. High-fructose corn syrup, in particular, can cause fatty liver disease.

The update also fails to include the advisory committee's recommendation to lower the alcohol limit for men from two drinks to one drink per day, which would match the current recommendation for women. But the guidelines do clarify that the daily limits can't be added up to permit binge drinking a couple days a week. Alcohol can cause liver disease, raises the risk of several types of cancer and is linked to increased mortality.

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