Commentary

Commentary on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2026–2030

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As the editors for *Nutrition Reviews*, we have reviewed more than 1500 review articles submitted over the past 2 years from nutrition researchers across the world. We recognize the tremendous challenges of making dietary recommendations for the entire American population through distilling the vast nutrition literature, sorting complex interrelations of dietary factors,[1] and overcoming the inadequate data available on personalized nutrition.[2–5] After reading the new US Dietary Guidelines for Americans for 2025–2030,[6] we realized that the significant changes from the previous guidelines will have a great impact on federal programs, including Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and school meal programs, as well as global food systems. More importantly, they will affect the perception and awareness of the public about healthy dietary practices. Therefore, the science behind the guidelines needs to be critically examined to ensure the guidelines are optimally reflecting the current scientific knowledge and avoiding harm and unnecessary confusion. With this Hippocratic reasoning, we are concerned that, as presented, the 2025–2030 dietary guidelines provide conflicting targets that interfere with their implementation, for example recommending added salt to meat and vegetables, and including beef tallow in the diet while requiring saturated fat in the diet to be less than 10% of the total energy intake and requiring the sodium intake to below 2300 mg/day. Some of the recommendations are counter to the established science that relates diet to health. This commentary presents our concerns by listing the most salient issues related to the 8 dietary guidelines.

1. **Eat the Right Amount for You**: While this is an important guideline, it lacks the specificity needed for Americans to determine proper portion sizes within

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each food group based on age, sex, size, and activity level, as well as the ideal methods for preparation, cooking, and storage. Under this guideline, the emphasis on water is helpful, especially as there is a need to decrease the number of sugar-sweetened beverages that are being consumed. However, without guidance on how to address the drivers of and barriers to consuming more of the healthy foods and less of the unhealthy foods, meeting this guideline will be difficult.[7]

2. **Prioritize Protein Foods at Every Meal**: Protein is an important component of a healthy diet. However, on average, Americans already eat more protein than is needed. Consuming 1.2–1.6 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight is challenging to do, and 1.0 to 1.2 grams per kilogram per day is sufficient.[8] The emphasis on consuming red meat throughout the guidelines is counter to the science that relates meat consumption to risk for cardiovascular disease[9,10] and cancer.[11] It also does not take into consideration the impact of the production of red meat on the environment and on planetary health.[12] Although animal protein can increase muscle mass, it does little to increase muscle strength or performance.[13] Furthermore, the current evidence suggests that reduced intake does not impact body composition.[14] Additionally, plant-protein–rich diets have a significant effect on improving total cholesterol, triglyceride, and high-density-lipoprotein cholesterol concentrations compared with animal protein–rich diets.[15] Red meat, and especially highly processed meat, has been associated with reduce gut microbiome diversity.[16] On the other hand, a greater emphasis on nuts[17] and legumes would improve the cardiometabolic health of Americans.[18,19] Reducing total red and processed meat consumption by swapping it with poultry, eggs, or fish could also help reduce coronary heart disease and all-cause mortality.[9,20]
3. **Consume Dairy:** Dairy products contain essential fat, protein, calcium, riboflavin, and vitamin B12, and are often fortified with vitamins A and D. However, the guideline to consume whole dairy products ignores the U-shaped association between total dairy consumption and abdominal obesity[21]; thus, specifics on the amount or type of dairy would be helpful. Not all dairy products are equal. For example, yogurt consumption has been associated with less abdominal obesity.[21] Additionally, yogurt, fermented milk, probiotic-fermented milk, and kefir consumption can reduce inflammatory markers, particularly tumor necrosis factor (TNF)α levels.[22] Also, fermented dairy products, including yogurt, may be more relevant than overall dairy intake for the prevention of type 2 diabetes.[23] Fermented dairy is an important probiotic for maintaining gut health,[24] while playing a key role in brain health via the gut–brain axis.[25] It is important that these nuances are provided to Americans. Reduced-fat dairy products should be included in the guidelines to help assist with reducing saturated fat consumption to below 10% of the total energy intake. The guidelines also neglect to mention that vitamin- and mineral- fortified plant-based milk substitutes derived from soy and nuts are suitable alternatives for those individuals unwilling or unable to consume dairy products.
4. **Eat Vegetables and Fruits Throughout the Day**: Consuming vegetables and fruits is important for overall health. Diets rich in fruits and vegetables, as in the Mediterranean diet, contribute to the prevention of cancer and cardiometabolic disease[26] and support bone metabolism,[27,28] dental health,[29] and neurocognitive health.[30] Furthermore, diets rich in vegetables and fruit prevent cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes, in contrast with diets high in red and highly processed meats.[31] There is also an inverse correlation between vegetable and fruit intake, and all-cause mortality and cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes.[32] Consumption of $\geq$5 servings per week of cruciferous vegetables is associated with a lower risk of colorectal, lung, upper gastrointestinal, gynecological (ovarian and endometrial), bladder, and renal cancers, and for men, at least 3 servings per week is associated with a lower risk of prostate cancer.[33] The fruit and vegetable dietary guidelines have provided a low bar for the amount of fruit and vegetables that Americans should consume.
5. **Incorporate Healthy Fats**: The guideline states "More high-quality research is needed to determine which types of dietary fats best support long-term health." This statement is technically true but scientifically conservative, perhaps reflecting policy caution rather than a lack of actionable evidence. Although processed foods are a major source of saturated fat, and in the past contained trans fatty acids, the guideline states that meeting the recommendation to have a diet with less than 10% of the energy intake coming from saturated fat can be achieved by reducing processed food consumption; this does not align with the fact that animal fat is a major source of saturated fat. The guideline to incorporate animal fat as part of a healthy diet is not supported by science. For example, palmitic acid which accounts for about 27% of the total fatty acid composition in red meat foods, stimulates nitric oxide production, inflammation, and oxidative stress that disrupts insulin signaling and leads to lasting damage to cardiometabolic health.[34] Additionally, promoting fat intake during pregnancy may increase the incidence of gestational diabetes.[35]

The guidelines should have a greater emphasis on fatty acids that have been shown to be beneficial to health. There is a beneficial association between regular olive oil consumption and cardiovascular diseases, cancer,

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type 2 diabetes, and all-cause mortality.[36] Omega-3 fatty acids have been associated with reduced inflammation and better cognitive function.[37,38] Although there is guidance around fish consumption, a major source of omega-3 fatty acids, it is only specifically mentioned in relation to pregnant and lactating women. More emphasis should be given to omega-3 fatty acids based on current evidence and in line with the guidelines from other countries.[39] The consumption of dietary sources of omega-3 fatty acids, including from nuts, and mono-unsaturated fatty acids has the potential to enhance mitochondrial biogenesis and metabolic pathways.[40] Finally, the US dietary guidelines missed an opportunity to clarify that plant seed oils and vegetable oils can be part of a healthy diet.[41]

6. **Focus on Whole Grains**: A focus on whole grains is an important guideline, as they provide fiber, vitamins, and minerals. The fiber in whole grains has several important impacts on the gut microbiome and increases satiety even though it may not significantly decrease total energy intake.[42] The B vitamins in whole grains may also have a direct impact on the diversity of the microbiome.[43] Bran is a vital part of whole grains and, includes many phytochemicals that support the immune system, regulates blood lipids, and may reduce the risk of some cancers.[44] Additionally, increased dietary fiber intake in early childhood may have a beneficial effect on blood lipid concentrations in later life.[45] The recommendation to consume 2–4 servings of whole grains per day contradicts the placement of whole grains at the bottom of the inverted pyramid graphic, which may be misinterpreted by some as encouragement to reduce whole grain intake.
7. **Limit Highly Processed Foods, Added Sugars, and Refined Carbohydrates**: We applaud the inclusion of guidance on highly processed foods for the first time in the dietary guidelines. As defined most frequently by the NOVA classification system,[46] these foods have had their food matrix disrupted by adding chemically altered food components, and they contain food additives to produce highly palatable, ready-to eat products that are shelf stable for long periods of time.[46] An accumulating body of research has shown correlations between the consumption of highly processed foods and many negative health outcomes, including metabolic syndrome,[47] inflammatory bowel disease,[48] cardiovascular and cerebrovascular disease,[49] diabetes,[50,51] depression,[52] and even mortality.[53] A controlled trial testing of ad libitum intake of highly processed foods was shown to lead to excess energy intake and weight gain,[54] which may explain some of the associations with obesity-related conditions. Thus, limiting added sugar and refined carbohydrates in the diet can reduce the risk for disease. Sugar and processed foods increase the risk for chronic diseases, and an emphasis on decreasing their intake is especially important for children and adolescents.[55,56] Additionally, the intake of calories from liquids, such as sugar-sweetened beverages and fruit juice, can increase health risks in later life.[45] The incorporation of highly processed foods into the American diet, as well as globally, may lead to negative health outcomes.[57] There is a need for more research to craft an achievable added sugar guideline for children under the age of 11; however, no added sugar in the diet may not be achievable.[55] This guideline will certainly have implications for food assistance programs such as WIC, which currently allows breakfast cereals up to 6 g of sugar per dry ounce or 21.2 g per 100 g.[58]
8. **Limit Alcoholic Beverages**: The lack of specific guidance on the amount of alcohol to consume is a shortcoming for these recommendations, compared with specific amounts recommended for sugar, saturated fats, grains, and fruits and vegetables. An acceptable amount of alcohol to consume for men and women has been calculated by many organizations, including recently by the National Academies of Science Engineering and Medicine.[59] National recommendations posted on the websites for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,[60] and the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism[61] recommended that moderate alcohol intake, defined as $\leq$ 2 drinks per day for men and $\leq$ 1 drink per day for women, are associated with lower risk of poor health outcomes. Even moderate alcohol intake is associated with a greater risk for hepatocellular carcinoma.[62] However, all forms of alcohol intake may not be equal. For example, there may be no difference in the effect that wine intake has on glucose and insulin concentrations, diastolic blood pressure, or BMI, and moderate wine consumption may decrease systolic blood pressure.[63]

CONCLUSIONS

A healthy American diet should include a greater intake of fruits, whole grains, legumes, vegetables, fish, and simple non-processed dairy products compared with the current less healthy pattern of consuming an excess of highly processed foods,[64] red and processed meat, alcohol, and both refined sugar and sugar-sweetened beverages.[65] Numerous studies have reported that a greater consumption of dark-yellow, green leafy, and cruciferous vegetables, fruits, nuts, whole grains, tomatoes, fish, and low-fat dairy is associated with improved cardiometabolic risk factors, better mental health, and better pregnancy outcomes.[66] These recommendations are in line with other national dietary guidelines.[39,67]

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The US Dietary Guidelines for Americans for 2025–2030 contain contradictions such as recommending the consumption of red meat, while at the same time recommending limiting the intake of saturated fats to less than 10% of energy intake. It is not possible to regularly consume red meat, full-fat dairy products, butter and beef tallow (as recommended in the guidelines and the inverted pyramid) while achieving a saturated fat intake of below 10% of total dietary energy. The guidelines also recommend limiting sodium intake, which has been associated with elevated hypertension,[68] but also state that one can add salt for flavor rather than presenting a stronger focus on the inclusion of spices and herbs, which have antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties.[69] The guidelines also missed an opportunity to provide dietary guidance for people with special needs and disabilities. The guidelines do not adequately address how to optimize the intake of micronutrients among the aging population, who are at increased risk of hospitalization and higher healthcare costs in the United States.[70–72] Furthermore, some of the scientists selected to establish the Scientific Foundation for the Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2025–2030 appear to have a conflict of interest, having commercial ties with influential sectors of the food and beverage industries.[73]

The message to eat real food is important but not new. What is needed now is for the United States to support its low-income populations, who are at the greatest risk of food insecurity and who do not have access to real food with appropriate nutrition-related policies and programs. Food insecurity is related to poor dietary quality,[74] higher intake of highly processed foods,[75] and a broad range of adverse health outcomes encompassing metabolic, psychological, behavioral, sleep, and cognitive health.[76] National food policies and programs need intensive nutrition education[77] and produce prescription-type programs to get whole food to people.[78] Taxes for unhealthy foods[79,80] and subsidies for healthy foods would encourage their purchase and consumption.[81] The impact of dietary recommendations on sustainability and planetary health should be considered. Finally, beyond direct nutrition-specific policies and programs, there is a need to strengthen ongoing data collection about the dietary patterns of Americans, and to support programs such as the Child Tax Credit, Economic Impact Payments, Earned Income Tax Credit, housing and rental assistance, Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.[82]

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None declared.

Data Availability

Not applicable.

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