

'Enjoy your food but eat less': Latest dietary guidelines

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New federal dietary guidelines, released Monday by the US Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services lays down some new rules in healthy eating that include consuming less empty calories, less salt and at least half a plate full of fruits and vegetables a day.



(Image: Wikimedia Commons)

The guidelines come up every five years and this is a similar guideline as the last one but according to experts, this time around the message is stronger and clearer: "Eat less and eat better" and "Enjoy your food, but eat less." It also focuses on children 2 years and older plus the 23 key recommendations for the general population and six additional ones for specific groups such as pregnant women.

Figures show that about one-third of the adults in this country are obese. Poor diet and lack of exercise can lead to heart disease, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis and some types of cancer. According to Kathleen Sebelius, health and human services secretary, "The obesity epidemic carries a really steep cost... About three quarters of our health care costs are connected to chronic disease." She added, "A more healthy country is a more competitive and prosperous country."

Some key recommendations

- Sodium intake of not more than 2300mg a day. Those who are 51 and older, suffer from diabetes or chronic kidney disease or are part of groups at high risk for hypertension, such as African Americans, should aim for 1500mg a day or less.
- Less than 300mg per day of dietary cholesterol to be taken per day.
- Limits on trans fatty acid consumption by lessening foods that contain synthetic sources of trans fats, such as partially hydrogenated oils, and by limiting other solid fats in diet.
- Limitation of saturated fats to 10% of calories and preferable replacement with monounsaturated and poly unsaturated fatty acids. Oils must replace solid fats where possible.
- Reduction in the number of calories that come from solid fats and added sugars.
- Reduction in consumption of refined grains, especially refined grain foods that contain solid fats, added sugars and sodium. Whole grains should be at least half of total grain consumption.
- Increase of a variety of vegetables, especially dark green, red and orange vegetables, and beans and peas in diet.
- Milk, yogurt and cheese, or fortified soy beverages, should be mostly low- or fat-free versions.
- Protein in diet should mainly come from seafood, lean meats and poultry, eggs, beans and peas, soy products, and unsalted nuts and seeds.
- Over sized portions should be avoided
- A good rule is to drink water instead of sweetened beverages.
- Alcohol should be consumed only in moderation, which means up to one drink per day for women and two drinks per day for men.

Less salt, the better

Speaking on the current high consumption of salt or the average 3400mg of sodium each day by most Americans, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said, "This is obviously a significant reduction that is being proposed and one that we hope the food processors in particular will take into account." The Salt Institute questioned the link between sodium and high blood pressure, arguing the recommendation would have a variety of negative effects on health, including worsening the obesity epidemic by driving people to eat more overall to satisfy their desire for salt. Morton Satin, the institute's vice president for science and research said, "The guidelines, if followed, may have negative substantial unintended health consequences."

Vilsack said, "This is a crisis we can no longer ignore...The bottom line is that most Americans need to trim our waistlines to reduce the risk of developing diet-related chronic disease. Improving our eating habits is not only good for every individual and family, but also for our country." Sebelius added, "Helping Americans incorporate these guidelines into their everyday lives is important to improving the overall health of the American people... The new dietary guidelines provide concrete action steps to help people live healthier, more physically active and longer lives."

The guidelines were prepared by a committee of experts that conducted an exhaustive review of the scientific literature about diet, exercise and health, as well as hundreds of public comments and testimony at a series of public meetings.

However Margo G. Wootan of the Centre for Science in the Public Interest feels, "Without even more serious governmental efforts - such as banning artificial trans fat and limiting sodium in packaged foods - the dietary guidelines will not be sufficient to fend off the costly and debilitating diet-related illnesses that afflict millions of Americans."

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