

Noble Path

Taking a Bite Out of the 2020-2025 USDA Dietary Guidelines



by Cindi Juncal

Every five years, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) updates its Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The information is used as the basis for federal food programs such as MyPlate, which in turn influences public school lunch programs and the content of nutritional posters nationwide. It establishes standards for food nutrition labels and also guides what doctors and health professionals prescribe to their patients and clientele.

The 2020-2025 version is the 9th edition and carries the tagline, “Make Every Bite Count”. It is a hefty 150 pages, with the bulk of the report unchanged, except for a few notable and welcome additions. What is disappointing is what it doesn’t add, but more on that later.

First, the good news: There are suggested dietary patterns for infants and toddlers, from birth to two years. Also added are food allergy prevention tips aimed at reducing the risk of peanut sensitivity and an expanded section on healthy dietary patterns and food safety during pregnancy and lactation. The report extends the previous limits for saturated fat, sodium and added sugars, but this time includes age specifications. Graphics were simplified to make the entire plan more user friendly and there are new sections on weight and obesity in children.

Now for the not-so-good news: While researching what nutrition experts thought of the new guidelines, it became clear that the best way to make every bite count was to avoid taking some bites altogether.

In his review of the 2020 Guidelines, Dr. Walter Willett, Professor of Epidemiology and Nutrition at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, noted some important omissions which affect not only our physical well-being, but our planetary health as well.

“Like the previous edition, the Guidelines are silent on the environmental impacts of their dietary targets, which other analyses show would have serious impacts on climate change and other environmental footprints because of the relatively

large amounts of meat and dairy foods recommended... The production of animal-based foods tends to have higher greenhouse gas emissions than plant-based foods and red meat (especially beef) and dairy stand out for their disproportionate impact.”

Dr. Willett also notes that the dairy recommendation of three servings per day “has never been justified by evidence for health outcomes” and criticizes the report for burying the clarification to avoid processed meats (e.g., hot dogs, sausages, ham, luncheon meats), within the

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body of the work, instead of highlighting it in their summary of protein recommendation for easy reference. He concludes, “This is a particularly important distinction, since consuming healthy protein sources like beans, nuts, fish, or poultry in place of red meat and processed meat can lower the risk of several diseases and premature death.”

Melissa Mathes, MPH, RD, CSSD, owner of Total Nutrition Counseling (and registered dietician nutritionist for The Noble Path Foundation), agrees with Dr. Willett and voiced her own concerns over the panel’s failure to address food waste and sustainability. She was also displeased on how lobbying efforts adversely affect the final guidelines.

For example, the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC), which provides data-driven guidance to the HHS and USDA in developing their final report, recommended that Americans should limit their sugar intake

to 6% of their daily calories, vs. the current 10% threshold. The American Heart Association (AHA) and World Health Organization (WHO) have also long encouraged that a maximum intake of added sugars should meet or exceed this lower requirement.

However, after the sugar industry presented their own studies and argued that the lower threshold would be unrealistic and thereby unattainable by most Americans (since the average daily intake of added sugars hovers around 15% of total calories per day), the guidelines remained unchanged. “Disregarding a science-based threshold simply because sugar and soda lobbyists convince committee members a lower number isn’t doable is not only lowering the bar on credibility, but it’s also doing everyone a huge disservice,” argues Mathes,

“Using the correct numbers could have a huge benefit on public health and we shouldn’t be conforming to the lowest common denominator.”

Mathes’ lobbying concerns are bolstered by numbers. And by numbers, we mean DOLLARS. GreenChoiceNow.com reported that prior to the 2015-2020 guidelines being released, Coca-Cola alone spent \$8.67 million on lobbying. The dairy industry spent \$7.12 million, factory farming and animal agriculture spent \$4.58 million, and the food products manufacturing industry (think “processed foods”) spent a staggering \$18.83 million. In addition to Coca-Cola and PepsiCo, other big brand names paying for favorable messaging included Monsanto, Nestle, and McDonald’s, to name a few.

Lobbying money may have affected the alcohol recommendations as well. Prior to the final edit of the 9th edition, the scientific advisory committee wanted to reduce the upper limit for men down to one drink per day.

“Whatever kind of study you look at, two drinks a day is associated with a higher risk of death than drinking one drink a day. In the context of a health document, why would you endorse people drinking up to a level in which

mortality increases?” Timothy Naimi, a physician and alcohol researcher at Boston University who served on the federal committee, told the Wall Street Journal.

But according to the Union of Concerned Scientists, a national nonprofit organization founded at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, “During the three years preceding the release of the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines, dozens of industry groups representing the interests of beer, wine, and liquor companies spent an average of \$27 million per year lobbying members of Congress” in hopes of forming cozy relationships. As if on cue, “in August 2020, 28 members of Congress addressed such a letter to USDA and HHS secretaries, challenging the scientific committee’s findings on alcohol and mortality.” And the limit remained at two drinks per day.

In closing, the dietary guidelines we are stuck with for the next five years may not be as aggressive as we anticipated, but there were definite improvements which leave us hopeful even though the money influence of big corporations and industry giants will no doubt continue to haunt us for years to come. Our best bet in making every bite count is making sure that what we bite into is actually REAL food. By eliminating highly processed foods and eating a plant-predominant diet, we will automatically reduce added sugars, sodium and saturated fat while increasing our intake of fiber, antioxidants, vitamins and minerals that are essential for a healthy gut and a healthy life. 🌱

If you are interested in more specifics, we recommend Harvard’s Healthy Eating Plate, which can be found here: www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/healthy-eating-plate.

Cindi is President and Founder of The Noble Path Foundation, a nonprofit 501(c)(3) dedicated to raising awareness on childhood obesity, T2 diabetes and the importance of sound nutrition and lifestyle choices for our youth. For sources and links to the statistics mentioned in this article, please visit our website and search for the article under our blog at www.thenoblepathfoundation.org