



Evolving Diet Advice

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Americans, as a group, have never eaten as healthily as they should. The statistics back it up: roughly 74% of American adults are overweight or exhibit obesity, and 40% of children or adolescents fit into that unhappy category. Due to consumption of high-cholesterol diets, about 18.2 million adults have coronary heart disease, and 45% of adults are currently afflicted with hypertension. Due to high-sugar content in American diets, almost 11% of Americans have type 1 or type 2 diabetes.

People have a right to be confused about what, exactly, should be included in a healthy diet, because the standards published by the government keep changing. You can see a “Food for Fitness” poster from the 1950s, developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which recommended quite a lot of whole milk, two more servings a day of meat, and four or more servings of bread and cereal—a diet which seems tailor made to create the kind of health problems that Americans are experiencing today, but which were undoubtedly music to the ears of certain food industries. One looks in vain for any admonitions about processed food, excess sugar and salt or other additives or preservatives.

During the 1970s, the government recommendations told Americans to raise carbohydrate consumption to account for 55-60% of their total caloric intake; by 1992, the sturdy base of the recommended food pyramid consisted of bread, cereal, rice and pasta. In order to be healthy, Americans were told that they needed to consume six servings of these foods a day.

In 1980, the USDA and the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (later the Department of Health & Human Services) published the first brochure to warn against the health dangers of obesity, and in 1990 a new publication suggested goals for fat and saturated fat. In 2000, the guidelines changed again, with emphasis on consuming fruit and vegetables, and cutting back a bit on grains.

FOOD FOR FITNESS

A Daily Food Guide



MILK GROUP

Some milk for everyone

Children under 9 . . . 2 to 3 cups
Children 9 to 12 . . . 3 or more cups
Teenagers 4 or more cups
Adults 2 or more cups



MEAT GROUP

2 or more servings

Beef, veal, pork, lamb,
poultry, fish, eggs

As alternates—
dry beans, dry peas, nuts

VEGETABLE FRUIT GROUP

4 or more servings

Include—

- A citrus fruit or other fruit or vegetable important for vitamin C
- A dark-green or deep-yellow vegetable for vitamin A—at least every other day
- Other vegetables and fruits, including potatoes

BREAD CEREAL GROUP

4 or more servings

Whole grain, enriched, or restored

Plus other foods as needed to complete meals and to provide additional food energy and other food values

So, what are the latest recommendations? A recent publication by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, entitled 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines, includes something called the MyPlate Plan, which suggests that half of every meal be made up of fruits and vegetables, and half the remainder be made up of whole grains. It recommends foods and beverages with fewer added sugars, saturated fat and sodium, and it doesn't specifically include meat on that plate; it simply says to 'vary your protein routine,' which could include eggs or tofu instead of steak or chicken.

Dietary Intakes Compared to Recommendations: Percent of the U.S. Population Ages 1 and Older Who Are Below and At or Above Each Dietary Goal



A more detailed recommendation offers specific portions of dark green vegetables (1.5 cups a week); red and orange vegetables (5.5 cups a week), beans, peas and lentils (1.5 cups a week); starchy vegetables (5 cups a week), whole grains (3 cups a week), and just 5.5 cups of 'protein foods, which includes meats, poultry, eggs, seafood, nuts, seeds and soy products. Daily calories: roughly 2,400, although a chart at the back of the report more specifically recommends 2,200 to 2,800 calories for men, 1,800-2,200 for women, depending on age and activity level. Readers are warned against the beef fat in ground beef, breaded or fried foods, and sweetened fruit concoctions like applesauce with added sugars. (Movie theater-style popcorn with butter is also inveighed against.)

As you can see from the graphic, a survey of Americans shows that more than 80% of us have dietary patterns that are low in vegetables, fruits and dairy, and few are at or near the baseline recommendations (the center line) for just about any food group. As the report notes, dryly, "most Americans have substantial room for improvement."

Sources:

https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/sites/default/files/2020-12/Dietary_Guidelines_for_Americans_2020-2025.pdf

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5916427/>

<https://health.gov/sites/default/files/2019-10/1980thin.pdf>

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