

UPDATE ON THE NEW U.S. DIETARY STANDARDS

W. W. Campbell
Department of Nutrition Science
Purdue University

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA), first published by the U.S. federal government in 1980 and most recently updated in 2010, provide nutrition and diet guidance and information to help people ages two years and older promote lifelong health and to prevent chronic disease. The DGA is the cornerstone policy for all Federal food and nutrition programs, including those implemented by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Department of Agriculture (USDA). These two federal departments work together to update and publish the DGA every five years, as mandated by the U.S. Congress via the National Nutrition Monitoring and Related Research Act of 1990 (P.L. 101-445). The 2015 (8th) edition of the DGA, slated for release in late fall 2015, will be based on diverse input from government agencies, public and industry comments, and a scientific report from the 2015 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC).

The 2015 DGAC was appointed by the HHS and USDA Secretaries and governed by the Federal Advisory Committee Act and was comprised of 14 nutrition science, public health, and medical experts. The committee members worked from spring 2013 until February 2015 with stellar support from HHS and USDA staff to provide the federal government with a scientific report on a vast array of nutrition topics. Ultimately, the report was organized into the following seven topics: 1) food and nutrient intakes and health: current status and trends; 2) dietary patterns, foods and nutrients, and health outcomes; 3) individual diet and physical activity behavior change; 4) food environment and settings; 5) food sustainability and safety; 6) cross-cutting topics of public health importance: added sugars, sodium, and saturated fat; and 7) physical activity.

Several aspects of the DGAC work are important to emphasize. First, the DGAC accomplished its work with unparalleled transparency. All full committee meetings were held in public forums; all working group and sub-committee meetings were conducted with federal staff oversight; all procedural and scientific activities are in the public record, and all resources used to develop the DGAC report are documented and publically available worldwide. Second, the scope and focus of the committees' work were developed in close communication and approval of HHS and USDA officials, which means that all of the topics scientifically assessed and evaluated were within the DGAC mandate. This is important to emphasize because after the DGAC report was published some people and interest groups have expressed concern that the 2015 DGAC addressed topics not covered by previous DGACs. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the DGAC members had absolutely no role in drafting or implementing DGA policy.

The themes, findings and conclusions presented in the DGAC report include the following:

- Most Americans do not consume a diet consistent with DGA recommendations, which likely contributes to suboptimal dietary and nutrient intakes and reduced health and higher chronic disease rates.
- Many people consume diets low in vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and dairy, and high in sodium, saturated fat, refined grains, added sugars, and energy (calories).
- Mixed dishes, which include burgers and sandwiches, pizza, and various meat/rice/pasta/grain dishes, and snacks and desserts are major sources of energy and large contributors of sodium, saturated fat, and added sugars to the diet.
- Research supports the benefits of consuming a variety of foods and beverages as part of healthy dietary patterns. “Common characteristics of dietary patterns associated with positive health outcomes include higher intake of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, low- or non-fat dairy, seafood, legumes, and nuts; moderate intake of alcohol (among adults); lower consumption of red and processed meat, and low intake of sugar-sweetened foods and drinks, and refined grains.”
- While there are many ways to achieve a healthy dietary pattern, the DGAC report emphasizes three USDA food patterns (Healthy U.S.-Style, Healthy Vegetarian, and Healthy Mediterranean-style).
- Successful and sustained improvements in a person’s diet and health are greatly influenced by their personal, social, economic, and cultural environments. Effective multi-component approaches and policies (more so than individual ones) may work together with a person’s own efforts to improve their diet and health.
- Compared to the current U.S. diet, a diet with more plant-based foods and less animal-based foods and energy promotes both improved human health and food security (including food sustainability associated with reduced environmental impact).

As noted above, low- or non-fat dairy is included in healthy dietary patterns. Indeed, “The USDA Food Patterns include 3 cup equivalents of dairy products per day in patterns that are targeted to preteens, teens, and adults. The amounts included for younger children are 2 cups for 2 and 3 year olds, and 2 ½ cups for 4 to 8 years olds.” The DGAC report identifies the Dairy Group for its relatively high nutrient density of numerous essential macro- and micro-nutrients, but also cautions that the Dairy Group also contributes relatively high amounts of sodium to the diet, especially from cheese. “Increasing the proportion of fat-free milk consumed to meet Dairy Group recommendations [by proportionately reducing cheese intake] would increase levels of magnesium, potassium, vitamin A, vitamin D, and choline in the patterns, and decrease amounts of sodium, cholesterol and saturated fatty acids. It especially boosts levels of potassium and vitamin D, nutrients that are below intake goals in all patterns.” Importantly, dietary modeling research shows that “None of the alternatives to milk and milk products provide a similar enough nutrient profile in terms of these impacted nutrients to be considered for inclusion in the Dairy Group. However, alternative calcium choices could be selected in combinations that together provide the range of nutrients needed.”

Collectively, this information underscores that dairy foods and beverages are important components of healthy dietary patterns.

In summary, the DGAC report contains reliable, scientifically rigorous information and conclusions to promote healthy eating for improved health in America. The committee urges the federal government to use this information as a foundation to make population health a national priority and to emphasize the importance of healthy diets to prevent chronic disease and to promote and sustain both human and environmental vitality.

REFERENCES

All information and quotes were obtained from the Scientific Report of the 2015 Dietary Guidelines Advisory committee, U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Agriculture, <http://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015-scientific-report/> (accessed on September 1, 2015)