



NUTRITION CONNECTION

THE NEW DIETARY GUIDELINES FOR AMERICANS

WHAT CHANGED AND WHAT REMAINED THE SAME

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EVERY FIVE YEARS, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services jointly release the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. This document is intended to provide nutrition recommendations to shape federal nutrition programs and policies (including guidelines that will eventually roll out to school meals), as well as provide guidance for Americans on reducing the risk of chronic disease. In January 2026, the 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines were released with some significant updates – and here’s what you should know.

WHAT’S REMAINED THE SAME

While there were several fundamental changes in the new version, many of the core nutrition recommendations remained stable. These include:

- **Emphasis on Nutrient-Dense Foods:** Both the prior and current versions of the guidelines emphasize nutrient-dense foods in an appropriate amount. They specify that calorie needs are individualized, and those calories should be consumed primarily through nutritious foods like fruits, vegetables, protein, dairy, and whole grains.
- **Limit on Saturated Fats:** Like past versions, the current Dietary Guidelines call for a limit of 10 percent of calories from saturated fat. However, the current version has other

guidelines that could make it challenging to stay within this limit.

- **Limit on Sodium:** The recommendation for the general population (aged 14+) to limit sodium to 2,300 milligrams per day remains the same.
- **Recommendation for Whole Grains over Refined Grains:** Old and new versions of the guidelines both recommend whole grains over refined grains (albeit perhaps with stronger language in the new document).
- **Considerations for Specific Populations:** Many past recommendations for pregnancy, infancy, and childhood are retained in the new guidelines.

WHAT’S CHANGED

Below are notable updates worth your attention, as they may change future guidance on foodservice programming in some non-commercial settings. Regardless of where you work, though, it is helpful to understand the current recommendations being provided and whether they align with the scientific consensus.

Increased Emphasis on Protein

The new guidelines focus heavily on protein — both as far as amount and types. The current document suggests



that adults consume 1.2–1.6 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight per day, an increase from the current Recommended Dietary Allowance of 0.8 grams per kilogram per day.

This increase may be beneficial for some of the populations you work with, namely older adults. Inadequate protein intake has been linked to an increased risk of sarcopenia (a loss of muscle mass and function), while protein intake higher than the RDA has been linked to improved physical function and strength (especially when combined with exercise programs).

Both the prior and new guidelines maintain that protein foods can include both animal and plant-based sources, though the new guidelines – through language and the inverted pyramid visual – place an increased emphasis on animal proteins.



KEY UPDATES

- ✓ More emphasis on protein
- ✓ Strict limits on added sugar
- ✓ Emphasis on different fat sources

Like everything in nutrition, there is nuance to this conversation, and nutrition recommendations should always be individualized to the person. In an older adult struggling with appetite, for example, a small portion of lean beef can be invaluable for increasing protein intake without requiring a large volume of food. Yet for another older adult struggling with constipation, swapping in more plant-based proteins (like beans or legumes) that come with additional fiber might be a better choice for their scenario.

Stricter Limits on Added Sugar

We know that Americans consume too much added sugar. The CDC notes that children, adolescents, and adults consume an average of 17 teaspoons (68 grams) of added sugar each day. Excess added sugar intake may lead to increased risk of cardiovascular disease, digestive disorders, weight gain, and other health problems.

**THE NEW GUIDELINES
PLACE STRICTER LIMITS,
STATING,
“no amount of added
sugars...is recommended or
considered part of a healthy
or nutritious diet.”**



Earlier versions of the Dietary Guidelines were clear that added sugar should be minimized, suggesting that it make up less than 10 percent of calories consumed for children and adults. The new guidelines place stricter limits, stating “no amount of added sugars...is recommended or considered part of a healthy or nutritious diet.” It calls specifically for no added sugar at all for children up to age 10, and ideally none in adulthood as well. However, the document does specify if added sugar is to be consumed in adulthood, that it is limited to 10 grams in a meal.

The general scientific consensus is that reducing added sugar is beneficial. Some experts have raised questions about whether the total avoidance of added sugar is necessary or realistic (particularly in certain programs), though, or whether working towards a lower percentage of calories would have been enough to improve health.

In addition, questions remain whether certain foods with added sugar are less risky than other foods. Within the current body of research, for example, the clearest associations are present between sugar-sweetened beverages (like soda or sweet tea) and health risks. The data is less clear for small amounts of added sugar in other nutritious food choices. For example, a 2022 meta-analysis in *Nutrition research and practice* suggested that nutritious foods with added sugar weren’t linked to mortality risk in adults.

One might logically draw this conclusion when comparing a can of soda to a bowl of plain Greek yogurt with a small drizzle of honey. Both contain added sugar, but in different

amounts and with a different overall nutritional profile. More research is needed on this topic, though.

It is also important to remember that these are general population guidelines and may not apply to unique situations. A marathon runner, for example, might consume a sugar-sweetened sports drink during a long run for enhanced performance. An elderly individual struggling with weight loss may benefit from sugar-sweetened options to enhance calorie intake when other methods fail.

Recommendation to Avoid “Highly Processed” Foods

While the guidelines have always emphasized nutrient-dense whole foods, this version is the first to also specifically call for the avoidance of “highly processed foods.” For example, the document recommends that people “significantly reduce the consumption of highly processed, refined carbohydrates, such as white bread, ready-to-eat or packaged breakfast options, flour tortillas, and crackers” and “avoid highly processed packaged, prepared, ready-to-eat, or other foods that are salty or sweet, such as chips, cookies, and candy.”



WORKS CITED

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There is no doubt that the consumption of less nutritious, highly processed foods is an issue in our country. Data from the CDC indicates that people consume approximately 55 percent of calories from ultra-processed foods. Some of these foods contain unhealthy fats, added sugars, and excess sodium. Similarly, certain types of processing may impact the “food matrix,” the chemical and physical structure that impacts how the food is digested, absorbed, and utilized in the body.

Ideally, more scientific consensus will occur in subsequent years about defining “highly processed” foods, as there is no standard definition for this term. Most research on processed foods is done using NOVA, a classification scale based solely on the degree of processing and not on nutritional attributes. This may be problematic, as not all processed foods are detrimental to health.

For example, under NOVA, whole wheat bread purchased at the supermarket is classified as an “ultra-processed food” – which is the same classification that candy would receive. Some research on ultra-processed foods has indicated that certain subgroups, like whole grains or certain dairy products, may not have deleterious health effects.

That said, common sense tells us that reducing highly processed foods that are clearly less nutritious – like some of the examples provided in the

new guidelines – could certainly be beneficial for health outcomes.

How this will translate to school meal programs will be interesting to see in the future; it will likely demand increased funding if a heavy cut to processed foods is required. Cooking more from scratch will likely require increased staffing and/or equipment in many locations.

Emphasis on Different Fat Sources

One of the major shifts in the current version of the Dietary Guidelines is the emphasis on certain fat sources that were not previously promoted. These include beef tallow, butter, and full fat dairy products.

Some health experts have expressed concern over these recommendations. They note that these foods, combined with the increased emphasis on animal protein, could make it difficult for people to stay within the recommended limit of 10 percent of calories from saturated fat. Others in the scientific community note that some current research does suggest full fat dairy products may be neutral for health outcomes compared to other sources of saturated fat, however research is still evolving on this topic.

Shorter Document with Simplified Messaging

Notably, the new document is just 10 pages long with high-level messaging, an attempt to simplify the prior

version of 164 pages. The hope is that this change increases accessibility and understanding for the general public. However, some have expressed concern that the shortened version may not provide enough guidance for federal programming considerations.

The Institute for Food Technologists noted, “As the guidelines move from policy to practice, additional detail and clarification will be important to ensure consistent interpretation and effective implementation across federal and state nutrition programs.” Additional clarification and definitions may be needed for universal application to the programs that you work within, and these will likely take time (often years) to implement.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Many of the core principles of the Dietary Guidelines remain constant. There is an emphasis on a balanced diet comprised of nutrient-dense foods within appropriate calorie needs. However, certain updates may cause confusion, and not all nutrition experts and scientists agree on every aspect of the updated guidelines. Translating the new document into federal programming recommendations will take time and may require additional clarification from the administration. In the meantime, follow the current regulations that are relevant to your specific program.



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CE QUESTIONS | NUTRITION CONNECTION



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This **Level I NUTRITION** article assumes that the reader has introductory knowledge of the topic. The desired outcome is to ensure a basic understanding and explanation of the concepts of the subject matter and recalling of related facts.

Reading *The New Dietary Guidelines for Americans: What Changed and What Remained the Same* and successfully completing these questions online in the ANFP Marketplace has been approved for 1 hour of continuing education for CDM, CFPPs. To earn 1 CE hour, visit www.ANFPonline.org/market and select **Edge CE Articles** within the Publications section. Purchase the article and complete the quiz.

- How often are the Dietary Guidelines for Americans updated?
 - Every year
 - Every 5 years
 - Every 10 years
- Which of the following represents the recommendations for saturated fat intake in the current Dietary Guidelines?
 - Limit saturated fat to 10 percent of daily calories
 - No amount of saturated fat is considered part of a healthy diet
 - Enjoy saturated fat as desired in meals
- Inadequate intake of which nutrient may be linked to issues like sarcopenia and decreased physical function in older adults?
 - Vitamin D
 - Polyunsaturated fats
 - Protein
- Which of the following represents the recommendations for protein intake in the current Dietary Guidelines?
 - 0.8 to 1.0 grams per kilogram of body weight
 - 1.2 to 1.6 grams per kilogram of body weight
 - 1.6 to 2 grams per kilogram of body weight
- Which of the following represents the recommendations for added sugar intake for children (up to age 10) in the current Dietary Guidelines?
 - No added sugar is recommended
 - Less than 10 percent of calories from added sugar
 - Less than 5 grams of added sugar per meal
- Based on current research, which type of food with added sugar has the strongest link to detrimental health outcomes?
 - Sweetened yogurt
 - Whole grains
 - Sugar-sweetened beverages
- Americans consume approximately what percentage of calories from ultra-processed foods each day?
 - 30 percent
 - 48 percent
 - 55 percent
- Which of the following is true regarding recommendations for dairy intake?
 - Prior and current version of the Dietary Guidelines have the recommendations for dairy
 - The new guidelines specifically recommend including full fat dairy in the diet
 - At least 5 servings of dairy should be consumed each day

