Make healthier choices with dietary guidelines: NetWellness

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By Special to The Plain Dealer

To help you make healthier food choices, the United States Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services provide all of us with dietary guidelines based on the most current and reliable scientific information available.

The most recent (2010) Dietary Guidelines for Americans places stronger emphasis on reducing calories and increasing physical activity. They encourage us to eat more healthy foods like vegetables, fruits, whole grains, fat-free and low-fat dairy products, and seafood and to cut back on sodium, saturated and trans fats, added sugars, and refined grains.

Unlike the 2005 release of the dietary guidelines, the newest version treats obesity in the United States as a crisis. This means many of the recommendations were made with an aim to slim down Americans' waistlines.

Give your diet a tune-up

The guidelines provide concrete actions to make translating the recommendations into your everyday life easier:

- Enjoy your food, but eat less.
- Avoid oversized portions.
- Make half your plate fruits and vegetables.
- Switch to fat-free or low-fat (1 percent) milk.
- Compare sodium in foods like soup, bread and frozen meals -- and choose the foods with lower numbers.
- Drink water instead of sugary drinks.
- More consumer-friendly advice and tools are available at choosemyplate.gov, which replaces the MyPyramid.gov website.

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Key features of the guidelines

The most recent update tightens many of the restrictions made in previous years. According to the release, the average American consumes 3,400 mg of sodium per day (of which salt is the major contributor). Under the guidelines, we should be consuming less than 2,300 mg of sodium per day, but ideally somewhere closer to 1,500 for people over 51, all African-Americans, and people at high risk for high blood pressure, diabetes or chronic kidney disease (1,500 mg of sodium is equal to less than half a teaspoon of salt). The majority of salt is consumed through eating processed foods, as compared with added table salt.

Also, the guidelines drastically reduced the percentage of calories that Americans should take in from solid fats and sugars (fat in all meats, butter, stick margarine, milk fat, table sugar, desserts, candy, sodas and other sugar-sweetened beverages).

Americans consume an average of 35 percent (or about 800 calories per day). Now, the guidelines urge most people to consume no more than 5 to 15 percent of calories from these foods. In doing so, the focus shifts to eating more nutrient-dense foods (those with the most nutrition and health value).

While decreasing sodium, sugar and solid fats in our diet, we are also encouraged to include a variety of lean protein foods, vegetables, fruit, whole grains and fat-free or low-fat milk products. These foods give us key nutrients such as potassium, fiber, calcium, vitamin D and more.

The guidelines recommend that Americans eat lean proteins, including at least two servings of fish per week, more seafood, lean meats, poultry (skinless), and eggs. Recommended plant protein sources include beans, soy products, unsalted nuts and seeds, which can also be used to satisfy a snack craving. In addition, half of the grains we consume should be whole grains, which naturally contain fiber and many nutrients that are missing in highly processed grains.

More than a diet

Through improved nutrition and physical activity, the recommendations are intended to give advice on achieving an overall healthy eating pattern that will help to: promote health; reduce the risk of chronic diseases; reduce the prevalence of overweight and obesity.

The dietary guidelines have been released at a time when the majority of adults and one in three children are overweight or obese. These new and improved dietary recommendations give you the information you need to make thoughtful choices of healthier foods in the right portions and to complement those choices with physical activity.

Adopting the recommendations in the Dietary Guidelines can help you live a healthier, more physically active and longer life, as well as contribute to a lowering of health care costs.

Related topics: dietary guidelines, food pyramid, usda