

Are the New Dietary Guidelines Realistic?

It's time to do the math

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Some people say that the latest Dietary Guidelines for Americans from the U.S. Department of Agriculture ask too much. Yet these guidelines explain what we want to know: How we can avoid nutritional deficiencies, promote our health and decrease the risk of chronic diseases like cancer and heart disease. Since the majority of our population is overweight and lifestyle-related diseases take a larger toll in the U.S. than in many other Western nations, we need to make significant changes in our eating and exercise habits to meet the new guidelines. But do we have to make ourselves miserable, as some claim?

Some people who have tried adjusting their diets to the new guidelines complain of hunger. But hunger usually results from only partially following the guidelines. If you cut back on meat portions and nutrition-poor desserts and snacks and forget to eat more hunger-satisfying fruits, vegetables, whole grains and beans, hunger is a possible consequence. When people fully implement the whole new style of eating, their hunger tends to be completely satisfied.

Trying to eat more vegetables and fruits, however, is a formidable barrier for many people. After more than ten years of hearing the "five-a-day" message, the average consumption of produce is no closer to that target. At the same time, research has revealed important benefits to virtually every aspect of health from the substances in these plant foods. The new guidelines set a target to aim for: 7 to 10 servings a day for the average adult.

People who wait until dinner to eat any fruits and vegetables will almost surely fail to meet this target. An easy way to succeed is to adopt habits that make vegetables and fruits part of every meal and snack. For the average American, that will mean eating two more pieces of fruit and one more cup of vegetables each day. By choosing fruit instead of chips or cookies for a snack or dessert, including fruit at breakfast, and adding a vegetable at lunch, the typical person can fulfill the new recommendations.

Trying to eat three or more servings of whole grains each day may seem like another major hurdle for some people, especially since the average American now gets only one. But the goal is to replace refined grains with whole-grain products and decrease the consumption of refined grains by two or three servings. Don't try to eat whole grains on top of what you already eat. Good replacements are choosing whole-grain cereals, using whole-grain breads for sandwiches, ordering brown rice or whole wheat pasta, or purchasing whole-grain crackers. For a snack instead of cookies, try whole-grain cereal or popcorn. Instead of a doughnut for breakfast, grab a whole-wheat English muffin.

Some people mistakenly think that the guidelines require complex calculations. You can eat healthfully without any calculations and still meet the guidelines. Simply follow the New American Plate eating style advocated by the American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR). Start by limiting animal protein to one-third of your plate or less at each meal. Fill the rest of your plate with plant foods: vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans. Your plate should have at least a cup to a cup-and-a-half of vegetables and fruits. If you always opt for low-fat meat and dairy choices and low-sugar drinks and snacks, you won't have to calculate how to make up for less-nutritious choices. And if you eat portions just large enough to satisfy your hunger, you won't have to count calories.

The new guidelines ask a lot of us: Eating for good health and disease prevention may be best accomplished with a complete change of habits. But we should be happy to embrace this change. The typical food choices of an American, the overwhelming portions and sedentary lifestyles are keeping us from living the healthy lives we could have.