

New Food Guidance System is Released!

The nation is moving ahead in multiple and significant ways affecting nutrition. Already this year, the Federal Government released the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and in April, the first revision to the Food Guide Pyramid since 1992 was made.

There is no coincidence that the two came out in close proximity to one another. The Dietary Guidelines is the science-based policy-setting document that is intended to set the agenda for all nutrition education and research. The new Food Guidance System is an outgrowth of the Dietary Guidelines in that it is intended to be an educational tool that helps consumers follow the key recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines.

Law determines when this process plays out. The National Nutrition Monitoring and Related Research Act of 1990 requires the Secretaries of Agriculture (USDA) and Health and Human Service (HHS) to publish jointly the Dietary Guidelines for Americans every five years. Consumers from the age of 2 and up receive sound scientific advice on food choices that promote health and help prevent disease from these guidelines. The process took 18 months, beginning with the appointment of 13 experts in food, nutrition and health to evaluate the current science and make recommendations based on the best evidence available. By last fall, this independent panel had produced a technical advisory report that served as the basis for the Dietary Guidelines themselves.

The 2005 *Guidelines* have a new structure. Previous versions summarized the science in 10 or fewer bullet points, and then explained those major points in chapters. This latest edition highlights 41 recommendations, grouped under the nine interrelated focus areas. Twenty-three of the recommendations are for the general population while 18 are for specific populations such as pregnant women, children and the elderly. The *Guidelines* emphasize that people's nutrient needs should be met primarily through food, with attention to the total diet.

Because many consumers look to the Guidelines for personal nutrition messages even though they are not intended as individual nutrition advice, a new consumer pamphlet has been created to help people implement the recommendations in everyday life. This consumer pamphlet, *Finding Your Way to a Healthier You: Based on the Dietary Guidelines* advises the public to make "smart choices from every food group," and to "find balance between food and physical activity." HHS and USDA officials hope they have designed a truly user-friendly resource for all consumers. The English version is already available online at <http://www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines/index.html>. A Spanish version is currently being developed.

Other new features of the 2005 *Dietary Guidelines* for Americans include:

- Calories and calorie balance as the primary message, urging physical activity as a complement to good eating
- Portion recommendations in household measures rather than "servings"
- Increased recommendations for fruits, vegetables, and whole grains (2 cups fruit, 2 1/2 cups vegetables, and three 1-ounce equivalents of whole grains)
- A recommendation to keep trans fat intake as low as possible
- A reduced recommendation for sodium (2,300 mg/day for healthy population and 1,500 mg/day for those with hypertension) coupled with an increased consumption of potassium.

- An increased low fat or fat free dairy or dairy equivalent recommendation of 3 servings/day.

Designing an image that could convey these messages has been tricky. The previous Food Guide Pyramid, developed in 1992, was meant to graphically depict the kinds and types of foods that provide a nutritionally adequate diet. But nutritional standards are changing over time, as we learn more about food consumption patterns and food composition, and as new tools like the Dietary Reference Intakes are developed. So USDA undertook a review of the science behind the pyramid as well as public reaction to the pyramid itself. That public process and all the comments received in it can be accessed online at www.usda.gov.

The review yielded some common concerns regarding the 1992 version. Most nutrition professionals agreed that serving sizes were not well understood; that moderation and individual calorie needs were not adequately emphasized; that the exercise piece of the energy balance equation was missing, and there was inadequate emphasis on the differing quality of foods within groups. They pointed to statistics, which show Americans are over-consuming calories while under-consuming nutrients such as calcium, potassium, magnesium, fiber, and vitamins A, E, D, and C. From that, came agreement that there needed to be greater emphasis on maximizing nutrition within calorie needs.

On April 19, the new Food Guide Pyramid was posted at *MyPyramid.gov*. The new pyramid traded in its food pictures for bright colors that are intended to represent the six food groups -- oil was added to the previous five groups. Each group is represented by a color band that starts at the bottom and then narrows toward the top. This new graphic is intended to emphasize the importance of balancing intake among all groups, getting variety within the groups, and minimizing intake from the less nutrient dense choices while maximizing choices from the more nutrient dense choices. A staircase and a silhouetted climber was added to remind people that exercise must balance with intake. And the slogan, "Steps to a Healthier You" is intended to motivate consumers to take small steps towards improving their exercise and nutrition habits.

Although the 1992 Food Guide Pyramid was never intended to be stand-alone nutrition education, many people assumed it was. That led to many of the criticisms about the image. Designers of the new Pyramid have worked to prevent misinterpretation by reserving specific pictures of and advice about food for the more comprehensive education tools such as those that are available to consumers on-line or a poster. That lets the stand-alone graphic serve as a reminder for people to log on about healthy nutrition. Once online, individuals can enter their age, gender, and activity level in order to determine which of the 12 possible calorie level pyramids are right for them and to get specific advice about making healthy choices within the groups. Health professionals can log into the website for print ready materials that they can use to help consumers understand and apply the food guidance to their lives.

Initial reaction includes some concern that new Food Guidance System may be more confusing to consumers since it requires people to be web savvy. One size won't fit all. Others think that moving to a more symbolic graphic supported by more detailed educational materials is a step in the right direction. In either case, dietetics professionals will want to become familiar with *MyPyramid.gov* in order to help their clients and consumers and to motivate healthier food and activity choices.

The full text of the Guidelines as well as other material is available online at <http://www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines/index.html>.

All updates on The Food Guidance System can be found at www.mypyramid.gov.

