

Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2015–2020: A Summary¹

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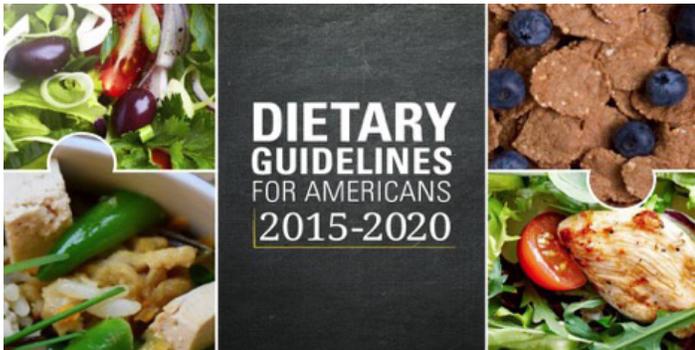


Figure 1. Dietary Guidelines for Americans.
Credits: USDA (2016a)

Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2015-2020: A Summary

About half of all adult Americans have at least one chronic disease that could be prevented (USDHHS and USDA 2015a). Many of these preventable chronic diseases are related to poor eating and physical activity habits. The good news is that the risk of chronic diseases, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, and type 2 diabetes, can be reduced with the help of the 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (USDHHS and USDA 2015a).

What is the Dietary Guidelines for Americans?

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) is developed by the US Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS) and the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). This resource is published every five years and is based on current scientific evidence. The purpose of the DGA is to help Americans make better food choices to improve their health and decrease their risk for chronic diseases (USDHHS and USDA 2015a). The DGA is written for health professionals who use this information to develop nutrition education programs and materials for the public. The DGA also serves as the foundation for many federal nutrition programs, such as the National School Lunch Program.

The Big 5

The newest version of the DGA focuses on eating patterns instead of individual nutrients and food groups (USDHHS and USDA 2015a). An eating pattern is the combination of all the foods and beverages a person eats and drinks over time (USDHHS and USDA 2015a). The “Big 5” are the five main recommendations for healthy eating provided by the DGA (USDHHS and USDA 2015b). These five guidelines highlight the fact that a healthy eating pattern does not need a strict set of rules. Paying more attention to eating patterns instead of individual nutrients has made the DGA easier to follow by allowing room for foods we enjoy as well

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as foods that fit into our culture and budget. The overarching guidelines, listed below, are explained in the following sections.

1. Follow a healthy eating pattern across the lifespan.
2. Focus on variety, nutrient density, and amount.
3. Limit calories from added sugars and saturated fats and reduce sodium intake.
4. Shift to healthier food and beverage choices.
5. Support healthy eating patterns for everyone.

Follow a Healthy Eating Pattern across the Lifespan

The first of the “Big 5” guidelines is to follow a healthy eating pattern across the lifespan. The guidelines outline three healthy eating patterns that can serve as inspiration for your own healthy eating lifestyle. The Healthy US-Style Eating Pattern is described in the most detail by the guidelines, but it is not the only way to eat a healthy diet. The Healthy Mediterranean-Style Eating Pattern and the Healthy Vegetarian Eating Pattern are options as well. The Healthy Mediterranean-Style Eating Pattern contains more fruits and seafood and less dairy than the Healthy US-Style Eating Pattern. The Healthy Vegetarian Eating Pattern includes more legumes (i.e., beans and peas), soy products, nuts, seeds, and whole grains. The Healthy Vegetarian Eating Pattern does not include meat, poultry, or seafood; however, it still meets the same nutrient standards as the Healthy US-Style Eating Pattern (USDHHS and USDA 2015a).

No matter which healthy eating pattern you choose to model your healthy eating lifestyle after, remember that a healthy eating pattern must consider what you eat and drink and how much you eat and drink. Our unique daily calorie needs depend on our age, sex, height, weight, and physical activity level (USDHHS and USDA 2015a). MyPlate’s SuperTracker tool can help you calculate the number of calories you need every day and provide you with a recommended eating pattern for your calorie level (USDA 2016d). You can access the SuperTracker tool at <https://www.choosemyplate.gov/tools-supertracker>.

Focus on Variety, Nutrient Density, and Amount



Figure 2. A variety of fruits and vegetables.
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The next overarching guideline states that it is most important to focus on variety, nutrient density, and amount. To achieve this, vary the types of vegetables, fruits, grains, fat-free or low-fat dairy, protein foods, and oils that you eat. You should also pay attention to portion size and nutrient density (USDHHS and USDA 2015a). Nutrient density refers to foods with a high proportion of desirable nutrients compared to food components we should limit such as saturated fat, sodium, and added sugar (Drewnowski 2005). Examples of nutrient dense foods include vegetables, fruits, whole grains, seafood, eggs, beans and peas, unsalted nuts and seeds, fat-free and low-fat dairy products, and lean meats and poultry (USDA 2016b). Making nutrient-dense food choices is as easy as choosing whole wheat bread instead of white bread or using vegetables for dips instead of chips. Choosing foods that are nutrient dense is a good way to ensure that you meet your daily nutrient needs within your calorie limit. For more information about each of the food groups and recommended amounts for all ages go to <https://www.choosemyplate.gov/> and click on each of the food groups under the MyPlate tab (USDA 2016a).

- **Vegetables** are packed with many of the nutrients we need for good health. To get the health benefits offered by the plant kingdom, choose veggies from each of the five subgroups—dark green, red and orange, legumes like beans and peas, starchy, and other vegetables (USDHHS and USDA 2015a). Vegetables can be consumed in any form including fresh, frozen, or canned. When buying canned vegetables be sure to limit sodium consumption by choosing products with no added sodium.
- **Fruits** in any form (fresh, canned, frozen, or dried), including 100% fruit juice, can help you meet your needs. When choosing fruit, try to eat more whole fruit so you do not miss out on important nutrients and dietary fiber

(USDHHS and USDA 2015a). It is also important when buying canned and frozen fruit to avoid added sugar such as syrups.

- **Grains** include foods like wheat, rice, oats, cornmeal, barley, and other cereal grains (USDA 2016a). Try to make at least half of your grains whole grains. Refined grains lose fiber and nutrients during processing. These nutrients are added back into products that are enriched. Unfortunately, the fiber cannot be added back, so whole grains have more fiber than refined versions (USDHHS and USDA 2015a).
- **Dairy** can be part of a healthy eating pattern. However, most of the fat in dairy products comes from saturated fats, so it is important to choose fat-free and low-fat dairy options. You also can meet this recommendation by drinking fortified soy beverages that have a nutrient content similar to milk (USDHHS and USDA 2015a).
- **Protein foods** include seafood, lean meat, poultry, eggs, legumes (beans and peas), nuts, seeds, and soy products. Focus on variety when choosing protein foods. By eating more plant protein and lowering your meat intake, you can reduce your risk for heart disease, obesity, type 2 diabetes, and cancer (USDHHS and USDA 2015a).
- **Oils** are fats that are liquid at room temperature. Oils can be healthy sources of polyunsaturated or monounsaturated fats and are lower in saturated than solid fats (USDHHS and USDA 2015a).

Limit Calories from Added Sugars and Saturated Fats and Reduce Sodium Intake

The third guideline encourages an eating pattern low in added sugars, saturated fats, and sodium. The typical American diet is high in saturated fats, added sugar, and sodium. Eating too much of these may increase your risk for certain chronic diseases.

- **Saturated fats** should make up less than 10% of your daily calories (USDHHS and USDA 2015a). These fats are solid at room temperature and are found in animal foods like meat, milk, butter, cheese, and ice cream, as well as in hydrogenated oils, coconut oil, palm kernel oil, and palm oil.
- **Trans fat** intake should be kept as low as possible in a healthy diet. Most trans fats are man-made and found in processed foods, such as margarine and baked goods, that contain shortening. Use the Nutrition Facts label to identify foods that contain trans fats or look for the words “partially hydrogenated oils” in ingredient lists (USFDA 2016b).
- **Added sugars** should make up less than 10% of your daily calories. Including foods with added sugars in your diet provides calories but little to none of the essential nutrients. Added sugars go by many names, including corn syrup, dextrose, high fructose corn syrup, honey, lactose, maltose, molasses, nectars, and sucrose, among others (USDA 2016e). For a full list of ingredients to avoid, please visit <https://www.choosemyplate.gov/what-are-added-sugars>.
- **Sodium** is an essential nutrient and is usually needed by the body in relatively small quantities. Most adults get more sodium than needed. Too much sodium in the diet can increase blood pressure, which can lead to a condition called hypertension (i.e., high blood pressure). Hypertension causes damage to blood vessels and organs like the heart and is a risk factor for several conditions, including our leading killer: heart disease (American Heart Association 2016). Adults are advised to consume less than 2,300 milligrams of sodium per day. Those who already suffer from high blood pressure should try to eat less than 1,500 milligrams per day (USDHHS and USDA 2015a).
- **Alcohol** is not part of the USDA Food Pattern. If alcohol is consumed, it should be consumed in moderation by people over the legal drinking age of 21 years. This means

Amount Per Serving		% Daily Value*	
Calories	200	Calories from Fat	120
Total Fat	15g		20 %
Saturated Fat	5g		28 %
Trans Fat	3g		
Cholesterol	30mg		10 %
Sodium	650mg		28 %
Total Carbohydrate	30g		10 %
Dietary Fiber	0g		0 %
Sugars	5g		
Protein	5g		
Vitamin A	5%	Vitamin C	2%
Calcium	15%	Iron	5%
*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your Daily Values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs.			
		Calories	2,000
			2,500
Total Fat	Less than	65g	80g
Sat Fat	Less than	20g	25g
Cholesterol	Less than	300mg	300mg
Sodium	Less than	2,400mg	2,400mg
Total Carbohydrate		300mg	375mg
Dietary Fiber		25g	30g

Figure 3. Added sugars, sodium, and saturated fats on the nutrition fact label.

Credits: mustafahacalaki/gettyimages.com

up to one drink per day for women and up to two drinks per day for men (USDHHS and USDA 2015a).

Shift to Healthier Food and Beverage Choices

The fourth guideline encourages healthy shifts or small changes. Most Americans do not consume enough fruits, vegetables, low-fat or fat-free dairy, healthy oils, and whole grains. We also eat more added sugar, saturated fat, sodium, and calories than we need. To correct this unhealthy balance, this guideline urges everyone to choose nutrient-dense foods and beverages in place of less healthy options. To do this we must remember that a healthy eating pattern includes everything a person eats or drinks. All food and drink choices matter, and small shifts to healthy food options can make a big difference (USDHHS and USDA 2015a).

Exercise, along with a healthy diet, is an important part of a healthy lifestyle. Currently only 20% of adults meet physical activity recommendations (USDHHS and USDA 2015a). Most adults would benefit from increasing the amount of time they spend being active, decreasing screen time, and reducing the time they spend sitting. It is recommended that adults get at least two and a half hours of moderate exercise each week plus muscle strengthening exercises at least twice a week (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion 2008).

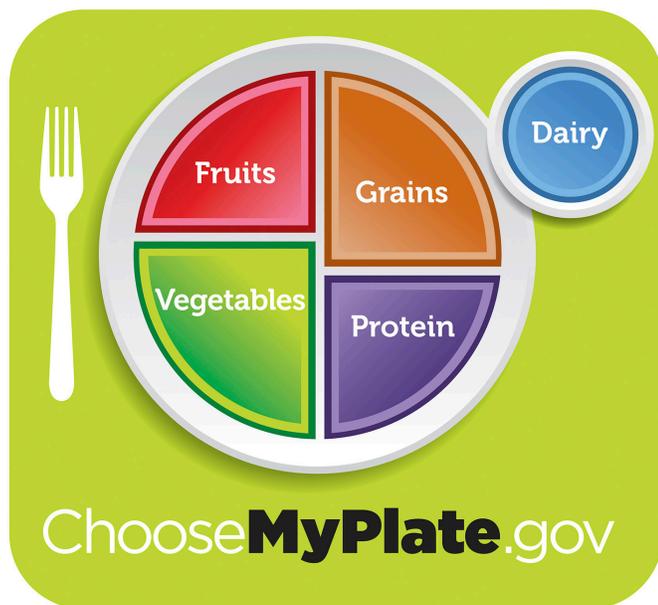


Figure 4. Choose MyPlate logo.
Credits: USDA (2016a)

Support Healthy Eating Patterns for All

This guideline aims to inspire the public and health professionals to make healthy lifestyle choices achievable for everyone by making options easy, accessible, and affordable. Many factors influence eating behaviors and physical activity behaviors. Strategies, such as school and worksite nutrition and physical activity policies, can affect these behaviors. The MyPlate graphic (Figure 5) is used to help individuals learn more about making healthy food and beverage choices over time. One of the ways the guidelines are being made more accessible to the public is through the USDA's ChooseMyPlate.gov website. This website has tools to help people apply the guidelines in their lives. These tools include recipes, sample menus, a body mass index (BMI) calculator, daily checklists, and the MyPlate SuperTracker app that can be used to track diet and physical activity (USDA 2016a).

These tools can be helpful in achieving a healthy eating pattern, but do not get overwhelmed trying to improve in every area all at once. Pick one or two goals and show yourself that you can be successful, then move on to the next healthy choice. Maybe you will start drinking more water or eating an extra serving of whole fruit with breakfast every day. If you need inspiration, check out some of the amazing success stories on the MyPlate website of individuals and families who have made positive changes: <https://www.choosemyplate.gov/myplate-mywins-families-individuals> (USDA 2016c).

The 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans gives us a great road map and tools that we can use to help us achieve a healthier eating pattern and lifestyle. Change is possible, and the health benefits of good nutrition are worth the effort!

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