

Introduction:

March is national nutrition month, which is a time to focus on improving health by shifting towards a more healthful food choices.

Where do we start?

The Human Health Services and the USDA jointly published a set of Dietary Guidelines to help address the nation's top health issues. These Dietary Guidelines are required to be updated every five years. The most recent recommendations published for the 2015-2020 *period* focus on five overarching goals:

1. Follow a healthy eating pattern across the lifespan

A healthy eating pattern consists of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean protein, low-fat dairy, and water

2. Focus on variety, nutrient density and amount

One food does not contain all the vitamins and nutrients our bodies need. Therefore, it is important to eat a variety of foods that are nutrient dense, which are foods that provide a high amount of vitamins and minerals. For example, a donut provides calories with minimal nutrients compared to an apple which provides vitamins and minerals in addition to calories.

3. Limit calories from added sugars and saturated fats, and reduce sodium intake

Added sugars, saturated fats, and sodium have been linked to an increased risk of developing chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and high blood pressure. Choosing healthier foods like fruits and vegetables leads to an overall reduction in intake of sugar, saturated fats, and sodium resulting in lower health risks.

4. Shift to healthier food and beverage choices

This change should be gradual, focusing on realistic ways to incorporate healthy options.

Added sugar	Saturated fats	Sodium
Choose whole fruits or 100% fruit juice	Choose lean cuts of meat	Use herbs and spices instead of salt
Replace sugary beverages with water or low-calorie beverages (e.g. Crystal Light, Mio)	Select low-fat or fat-free dairy options	Limit processed foods (e.g. canned/boxed foods, frozen dinners)
Use an alternative sweetener like Stevia or Nutrisweet when appropriate	Replace meat protein with plant proteins (e.g. beans)	Choose "low-sodium" options or rinse canned goods

5. Support healthy eating patterns for all

Healthy eating can be adapted to fit individual social, cultural norms, and values. Supporting healthy eating patterns for all means not passing judgement or criticism with the understanding that personal beliefs and factors influence an individual's food intake.

<https://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015/guidelines/chapter-3/social-ecological-model/>

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