

Building a Healthy Eating Pattern

The 2015-2020 edition of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans was recently released and there has been a shift in the recommendations from a concentration on individual nutrients to a focus on a generally healthy eating pattern. In the past, intake of individual nutrients and food elements like saturated fats and carbohydrates had been scientifically linked to disease risk. Now new data is available with evidence of a relationship between our cumulative food intake over time and our overall health status.

But what exactly is an “eating pattern”?

An eating pattern is the summative intake of all food eaten in combination over time. Because individual nutrients are not eaten in isolation, their interaction with other nutrients in a variety of food combinations can affect our health, both positively and negatively, depending on our food choices. The guidelines recommend that we shift to a healthy eating pattern in order to maintain optimal health and reduce disease risk. Follow these tips to achieve a healthy eating pattern:

1. **All foods fit, within the limits.** A healthy eating pattern is one that follows the main tenets of the guidelines; a mostly plant-based diet, high in fiber, low in fat, and moderate in lean protein and dairy. Following this pattern without exceeding limits, such as those set on sodium, saturated fats, and added sugar, allows all foods to be included in a healthy eating pattern. Moderation, variety, and balance are key.

2. **Nutrients from food.** The guidelines also recommend that we get our nutrients primarily from foods, suggesting that our food choices should be nutrient-dense. Nutrient-dense foods are those that contain essential nutrients, vitamins, minerals, and dietary fiber, and little or no solid fats or added sugars. These nutrients can occur naturally or be fortified, like citrus and vitamin C (naturally), and whole grain bread and iron (fortified). Supplements are only recommended when nutrient amounts are not achievable through diet alone. For instance, B12 supplementation may be necessary for those following a vegan diet.

3. **No boilerplate diet here!** A healthy eating pattern can be achieved in infinite ways and across multicultural food options. The guidelines recommend specific intake amounts for each food group, and even sub-divide in some groups (i.e. dark green vegetables, red and orange vegetables, legumes, starchy, and other), but they do not identify *specific* foods. For example, those following a 2,000-calorie diet should eat eight ounces of fish weekly. The types of fish consumed, be it tuna or trout, is up to the consumer.

Shifting focus from individual nutrients to an overall healthy eating pattern will create a cumulative picture of our health status. A healthy eating pattern can meet our nutritional needs, help us reach a healthy weight, and reduce the risk of chronic disease.

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