

Sustainability in the 2015 Dietary Guidelines: What the Advisory Committee Really Said, and Why USDA and HHS Should Listen

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Overview

The United States Departments of Agriculture (USDA) and Health and Human Services (HHS) are writing the 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, a document issued every five years. The final guidelines are informed by recommendations from the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC), a group of independent experts from the fields of nutrition, medicine, and public health.

The Guidelines are intended to be the most current, science-based nutrition recommendations for the prevention of disease and the promotion of healthy and active lifestyles for the general public.¹ They inform the design and implementation of federally funded nutrition programs such as the School Nutrition Program and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, and are used by nutrition and health professionals, policy makers, and educators.¹

The 2015 Advisory Committee released its 571-page Scientific Report in February, and for the first time included evidence-based recommendations on environmental sustainability as it relates to the American diet. The report presents the following conclusions about sustainability and diet:

- Linking health, dietary patterns, and the environment will promote human health and the preservation of natural resources
- A diet higher in plant-based foods (vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds) and lower in animal-based foods is both healthier and more sustainable than the current American diet
- The availability and Americans' acceptance of sustainable food choices will be essential to ensure food security for the U.S. population over time
- A more sustainable diet can be achieved through various dietary patterns and does not require the elimination of any food group
- Sustainability depends on altering individual dietary choices and agricultural production practices
- Consumer demand influences how and to what extent natural resources are used to produce our food

¹ 2015 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee submits report. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. February 19, 2015. Available at <http://www.hhs.gov/news/press/2015pres/02/20150219b.html>

Myths and Facts about the Advisory Committee's Scientific Report

Myth #1: The Dietary Guidelines for Americans should focus only on diet and nutrition, excluding all social, economic, or environmental considerations, and has not taken other related factors into account in the past.

Fact: In this process, past advisory committees have also considered important contextual factors beyond narrowly defined nutrition topics and have included topics that directly affect U.S. dietary patterns. The 2015 Advisory Committee's consideration of sustainability—as it pertains to the availability, adequacy, and acceptability of health-promoting foods—is similarly warranted. The 2005 DGAC report included economic considerations, such as the cost and availability of fruits, vegetables, and other health-promoting foods. The 2010 DGAC report recommended regulating the marketing of food and beverages to children. Nutrition experts have been advocating for the inclusion of sustainability concepts in the Dietary Guidelines since the mid-1980s, and the 2010 report even suggested that the 2015 DGAC incorporate sustainability considerations to ensure that adequate amounts of healthful foods are, and remain, available for all Americans.

Myth #2: There is not enough evidence to link sustainability with nutrition outcomes.

Fact: The DGAC conducted a rigorous systematic review of dietary pattern modeling studies that assessed environmental outcomes and found that studies consistently concluded that “higher consumption of animal-based foods was associated with higher estimated environmental impact, whereas consumption of more plant-based foods...was associated with estimated lower environmental impact.”² They found that the most health-promoting dietary patterns also promote sustainability, and that diets that adhere to the dietary guidelines were more sustainable than the typical American diet currently. The DGAC thoroughly analyzed the relevant peer-reviewed literature and only recommended sustainability measures that overlap with optimal health and nutrition outcomes.

Myth #3: There is no scientific basis for eliminating lean meat from the list of recommended foods.

Fact: The DGAC did not recommend eliminating lean meat, though they advised reducing consumption of red and processed meat. While the Advisory Committee did not include lean meat in the list of recommended foods, their systematic review found that “lean meats” were not consistently defined or handled similarly across studies; in this case, it would have been problematic to distinguish lean meats from all others for inclusion in the list of recommended foods. Additionally, the Advisory Committee found that Americans consume too much saturated fat, which is present in lean cuts of meat, relative to the Tolerable Upper Intake Level set by the Institute of Medicine², and that overconsumption of saturated fat poses health risks.

² Scientific Report of the 2015 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. Available at <http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015-scientific-report/>

Myth #4: The DGAC report calls for the elimination of animal-based protein in the diet.

Fact: The 2015 DGAC report generally recommends dietary patterns that are rich in vegetables, fruit, whole grains, seafood, legumes, and nuts, and moderate in low- and non-fat dairy products. It also includes the recommendation to reduce red and processed meat intake, but acknowledges that lean meat can be a part of a healthy dietary pattern (“as demonstrated in the food pattern modeling of the Healthy U.S.-style and Healthy Mediterranean-style patterns”²). The report includes multiple statements that no food groups need to be eliminated completely to improve nutrition or sustainability outcomes. It contends that dietary patterns higher in plant-based foods and lower in animal-based foods are generally more health-promoting and sustainable than current average U.S. dietary patterns, but does not advocate for the elimination of animal-based foods; conversely, it recommends moderate consumption of seafood and low- and non-fat dairy products.

Myth #5: The DGAC is prioritizing environmental sustainability over nutrition.

Fact: The DGAC report only discusses sustainability as it directly relates to nutrition and food security. The Advisory Committee does not advocate for certain dietary patterns based on sustainability measures alone, but rather includes evidence supporting its dietary recommendations by showing that the healthiest dietary patterns are also the most sustainable. Moreover, its consideration of sustainability is grounded in their necessary attention to current and long-term food security. As the report indicates, plant-based diets are associated with lower resource use than diets higher in animal products, and lowered resource use will be important in ensuring long-term food security.