

What does the 2015 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC) say about sustainability and a healthy diet?

A fact sheet prepared by the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future

Sustainability and human health are intertwined, and long-term food security depends on the availability and acceptability of a more sustainable American diet:

“Linking health, dietary guidance, and the environment will promote human health and the sustainability of natural resources and ensure current and long-term food security. The availability and acceptability of healthy and sustainable food choices will be necessary to attain food security for the U.S. population over time.”

A diet higher in plant-based foods and lower in animal-based foods is both healthier and more sustainable than the current American diet:

“Consistent evidence indicates that, in general, a dietary pattern that is higher in plant-based foods, such as vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds, and lower in animal-based foods is more health promoting and is associated with lesser environmental impact (GHG emissions and energy, land, and water use) than is the current average U.S. diet.”

There are many ways for Americans to eat sustainably and no food group must be eliminated completely to achieve a more sustainable diet:

“A diet that is more environmentally sustainable than the average U.S. diet can be achieved without excluding any food groups.”

A more sustainable diet “can be achieved through a variety of dietary patterns, including the Healthy U.S.-style Pattern, the Healthy Mediterranean-style Pattern, and the Healthy Vegetarian Pattern. All of these dietary patterns are aligned with lower environmental impacts and provide options that can be adopted by the U.S. population. Current evidence shows that the average U.S. diet has a larger environmental impact in terms of increased greenhouse gas emissions, land use, water use, and energy use, compared to the above dietary patterns. This is because the current U.S. population intake of animal-based foods is higher and plant-based foods are lower, than proposed in these three dietary patterns.”

Sustainability depends on our choices and our farming and production practices:

“Meeting current and future food needs will depend on two concurrent approaches: altering individual and population dietary choices and patterns and developing agricultural and production practices that reduce environmental impacts and conserve resources, while still meeting food and nutrition needs.”

“Foods vary widely in the type and amount of resources required for production, so as population-level consumer demand impacts food production (and imports), it will also indirectly influence how and to what extent resources are used. Individual and population-level adoption of more sustainable diets can change consumer demand away from more resource-intensive foods to foods that have a lower environmental impact.”

The DGAC is not alone in their approach to health and sustainability:

Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Australia, and Brazil have all incorporated sustainability into their nutrition policies, and the United Nations, the Sustainable Development Commission in the United Kingdom, the Institute of Medicine, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, and the National Research Council have all commissioned reports on sustainable diets.

“The approach used was to determine dietary patterns that are nutritionally adequate and promote health, while at the same time are more protective of natural resources. This type of comprehensive strategy also has been used by intergovernmental organizations.”

What does the DGAC recommend?

Make calories from saturated fat and added sugars less than 10% (each) of your daily calories:

“The goals for the general population are: less than 10 percent of total calories from saturated fat per day, and a maximum of 10 percent of total calories from added sugars per day.”

“Saturated fat intake exceeds current recommendations in the United States” and “lower levels of consumption would further reduce the population level risk of cardiovascular disease.”

Focus on replacing these foods with healthier options everyday rather than simply reducing your intake:

“Sodium, saturated fat, and added sugars are not intended to be reduced in isolation, but as a part of a healthy dietary pattern that is balanced, as appropriate, in calories. Rather than focusing purely on reduction, emphasis should also be placed on replacement and shifts in food intake and eating patterns. Sources of saturated fat should be replaced with unsaturated fat, particularly polyunsaturated fatty acids. Similarly, added sugars should be reduced in the diet and not replaced with low-calorie sweeteners, but rather with healthy options, such as water in place of sugar-sweetened beverages.”

Bottom line:

“The overall body of evidence examined by the 2015 DGAC identifies that a healthy dietary pattern is:

- Higher in vegetables, fruits, whole grains, low- or non-fat dairy, seafood, legumes, and nuts; moderate in alcohol (among adults)
- Lower in red and processed meats
- Low in sugar-sweetened foods and drinks and refined grains.”

Increase your consumption of: vegetables (without added salt or fat), fruits (without added sugars), whole grains, seafood, nuts, legumes, low/non-fat dairy or dairy alternatives (without added sugars).

Reduce your consumption of: red and processed meat, refined grains, added sugars, sodium, and saturated fat, substitute saturated fats with polyunsaturated alternatives, and replace solid animal fats with non-tropical vegetable oils and nuts.