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INTERPRETING DIETARY GUIDELINES FOR VARIOUS AUDIENCES

(By Guendoline Brown, Department of Food Science and Nutrition, Colorado State University)

In February 1980, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services (formerly HEW) released their long-awaited "Dietary Guidelines for Americans." The seven guidelines:

- Eat a variety of foods;
- Maintain ideal weight;
- Avoid too much fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol;
- Eat foods with adequate starch and fiber;
- Avoid too much sugar;
- Avoid too much sodium; and
- If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation;

are elaborated upon in a 20-page pamphlet, "Nutrition and Your Health; Dietary Guidelines for Americans," which focuses on qualitative dietary considerations rather than quantitative nutrient recommendations. The guidelines, which are directed toward helping Americans make prudent dietary decisions, have elicited much interest, discussion, and controversy. However, they provide an excellent base for the development of educational materials with wellness objectives.

Other recent notable attempts to assess food and diet quality are (1) the two editions of "Dietary Goals" developed by the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs in 1977, (2) the Surgeon General's Report, "Healthy People," published in 1979 by the Department of Health and Human Services (formerly HEW), (3) "Food," the new food guide developed by USDA in 1979, and (4) "Toward Healthful Diets," published in 1980 by the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Academy of Sciences. All of these publications may be loosely grouped together under the general umbrella of "food selection guidelines" with the common goal of helping consumers make intelligent food choices.

The "Dietary Goals" developed by the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs was the first comprehensive statement by any branch of the Federal Government on risk factors in the American diet. The goals are:

(1) To avoid overweight, consume only as much energy (calories) as is expended; if overweight, decrease energy intake and increase energy expenditure.

(2) Increase the consumption of complex carbohydrates and "naturally occurring" sugars from about 28 percent of energy intake to about 48 percent of energy intake.

(3) Reduce the consumption of refined and processed sugars by about 45 percent to account for about 10 percent of total energy intake.

(4) Reduce saturated fat consumption to account for about 10 percent of total energy intake.

(5) Reduce saturated fat consumption to account for about 10 percent of total energy intake; and balance that with polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats, which should account for about 10 percent of energy intake each.

(6) Reduce cholesterol consumption to about 300 milligrams per day.

(7) Limit the intake of sodium by reducing the intake of salt to about 5 grams a day.

The Surgeon General's report, "Healthy People," published in 1979, stated that individual nutrition requirement variations make exact dietary standards impossible to establish. However, the report further stated that given what is already known or strongly suspected about the relationship between diet and disease, Americans would probably be healthier, as a whole, if they consumed:

Only sufficient calories to meet body needs and maintain desirable weight (fewer calories if overweight);

Less saturated fat and cholesterol;

Less salt;

Less sugar;

Relatively more complex carbohydrates such as whole grains, cereals, fruits and vegetables;

Relatively more fish, poultry, legumes (for example, beans, peas, peanuts), and less red meat.

The document said the major objective of nutrition education should be to teach skills that can be used to improve dietary habits rather than merely provide information on the nutrient content of foods.

The 1979 version of the USDA food guide called "Food" divided foods into five main groups on the basis of their similarity in nutrient composition. These are the (1) vegetable and fruit group; (2) bread and cereal group; (3) milk and cheese group; (4) meat, poultry, fish, and beans group; and (5) fats, sweets, and alcohol group. This publication is supported by a brochure entitled "The Hassle-Free Guide to a Better Diet," which pictorially illustrates the food groups and indicates the recommended number and size of servings to be consumed daily from each group. Thus, "Food: The Hassle-Free Guide to a Better Diet" may be used by nutrition educators to assist people in planning adequate diets that will meet the recommended dietary allowances set by the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Academy of Sciences. The recommended dietary allowances are met by selecting servings of food from each of the food groups, rather than by calculating amounts of nutrients needed.

Rearrangement of the order in which the food groups appear pictorially, and the recognition of a fifth food group that includes foods low in nutrient density and high in fat, sugar, or alcohol are the major differences between the 1979 version of the USDA food guide and the well-known "Basic Four Food Groups" version used previously. Due to the high caloric content and low nutrient value of foods in the fifth group, they may generally be regarded as nutrient dilution factors in

the diet. That is, these food items reduce the diet's nutrient/energy ratio. Individuals whose calorie needs are least should, therefore, limit their intake of food from this category. The key to food guides is the information they provide about the number and sizes of servings recommended daily from among the different food groups that will meet the major nutrient requirements of given population groups.

In "Toward Healthful Diets" the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Academy of Sciences made the following recommendations to adult Americans.

Select a nutritionally adequate diet from the foods available, by consuming each day appropriate servings of dairy products, meats or legumes, vegetables and fruits, and cereal and breads.

Select as wide a variety of foods in each of the major food groups as is practical in order to ensure a high probability of consuming adequate quantities of all essential nutrients.

Adjust dietary energy intake and energy expenditure so as to maintain appropriate weight for height; if overweight, achieve appropriate weight reduction by decreasing total food and fat intake and by increasing physical activity.

If the requirement for energy is low (for example, reducing diet) reduce consumption of foods such as alcohol, sugars, fats, and oils, which provide calories but few other essential nutrients.

Use salt in moderation; adequate but safe intakes are considered to range between 3 and 8 grams of sodium chloride daily.

While there are basic differences among the "Dietary Guidelines for Americans," "Dietary Goals," "Healthy People," "Food," and "Toward Healthful Diets," they are all directed toward the establishment of a national nutrition policy. Data available to support each of these food selection guidelines are incomplete; as they may well always be. Surely, though, if there is ever going to be anything that we as nutrition educators can take a stand on together, it is on their general overall appropriateness. Food selection guidelines alone cannot serve as a national nutrition policy, however. As stated in February 1980, in the National Consortium's position paper on a national nutrition policy:

We need strong nutrition education programs which are scientifically based, forthright with response to controversy and well formulated in order to keep the public informed about the current state of knowledge with respect to diet and the prevention of disease.

Nutrition education, therefore, becomes an inherent part of attaining the goals of a national nutrition policy.

Nutrition education will continue to be challenging in the 1980's. Traditional teaching methods will have to be supported by innovative and cost effective techniques. Programs must be specifically designed to meet the needs and expectations of consumers. Messages must be carefully targeted to specific groups and must meet the informational needs felt by these target groups. Careful consideration must be given to existing dietary patterns and eating habits. Recommendations for dietary changes must be moderate; if they are too severe they will be ignored. Cultural and ethnic backgrounds, literacy levels and motivational levels of the target group must also be given serious consideration in the designing of effective nutrition education programs. Information must be interpreted in such a way that the audience being addressed identifies with that information and knows that the message is meant specifically for them.

In an effort to reach two diverse audiences with basically the same nutrition message, we at Colorado State University have attempted to develop two, equally effective, audiovisual learning modules based on the "Dietary Guidelines." The message is informational, with the objective of providing sound recommendations for dietary change, if an individual identifies a need for such change and desires to meet that need. The audiences, however, toward which the message is targeted, are quite different. One of the modules is designed for use in beginning level college nutrition classes, while the other was developed with funding provided by the Colorado Migrant Council for use in nutrition education programs for migrant farmworkers in Colorado. The challenge is to effectively meet the educational needs of both groups.

Language differences and differences in literacy levels were, of course, given consideration in developing the learning modules. However, it also was necessary to consider sociodemographic differences, cultural differences, differences in dietary patterns, and difference in income levels of the groups to be addressed.

The amount of emphasis placed upon a specific guideline differed between the groups. The limited variety in the diet of the migrant farmworker caused us to focus on the first guideline, "Eat a variety of foods." Likewise the typical high-fat, high-sugar, high-alcohol diets of many young college students provided excellent examples of low-nutrient-density diets resulting from the nutrient dilution caused by the fat, sugar and alcohol. Excellent opportunities to focus on those guidelines which may easily be tied to a nutrient density approach to dietary recommendations (for example, guidelines 3, 5, and 7) were therefore provided.

Other examples of targeting a specific guideline to a specified audience might be guideline 2, "Maintain ideal weight" for a weight reduction program, or guideline 6, "Avoid too much sodium" for individuals who are particularly concerned about their level of salt intake. It is most important that we, as educators, realize that there is room for flexibility in the use of the "Dietary Guidelines." There is no necessity that each of the seven guidelines be given equal emphasis whenever they are used in educational programs, nor is it necessary that all the guidelines be addressed in every program. It is far more important that the needs of the audience are identified and that programs are designed to address these needs.