

NEW DIETARY GUIDELINES FOR HEALTHIER AMERICANS

Written by Terry O'Hara

The old rules of eating were not good enough. New dietary guidelines have been formulated based on the newest scientific information available. The analysis was a joint project between the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Doctors, dieticians, nutritionists, other health professionals, food companies, school lunch programs across the country will be using this new information to help plan and counsel adults and children to lead more vigorous, healthier lives which are less prone to diseases associated with poor diets and/or too many calories.

Scientific evidence supports this fact: healthier food and more vigorous exercise can lead to healthier bodies and clearer minds. The old guidelines were not specific enough and many people thought that they were confusing. For example, serving size suggestions are easier to follow if common everyday measurements are used. The absolutely critical role that exercise plays along with the food we eat is specifically addressed and highlighted in these recommendations.

These new guidelines are especially interesting and pertinent in our town of Guilford. The Guilford Public School's Food Service has already been paying attention to this subject. They have made a number of small changes that have improved the quality of the school lunch program. These changes are consistent with the new dietary guidelines just issued this January, 2005. They have eliminated unhealthy snacks and foods containing trans fats and added a broader array of healthy sandwiches and salads. Each entrée selection is served with a fruit, a vegetable, one carbohydrate serving (predominantly a whole grain) and milk. Assuming our children eat what is on their tray...there is an opportunity to enjoy a wide selection of healthy foods.

Here are some of the general highlights from the report:

1. Eat a wide variety of foods within and among the basic food groups

Eating a wide-selection of fruits and vegetables is a must and they have increased the recommended amount. Five to nine servings a day is recommended for a healthy diet. The report uses a 2000 calorie a day diet which needs to be adjusted up or down for individuals. But the fact remains that fresh fruits and vegetables are a cornerstone in a healthy diet. Aiming for 2-3 cups worth of fruits and vegetables per day makes it much easier to calculate.

2. Balance calories eaten with calories burned to maintain ideal body weight and be physically active every day.

The importance of exercise is highlighted and interwoven with new and aggressive suggestions. These advisories are HUGE departures from the past. Basically, adults and children should be physically active EVERY SINGLE DAY. The report suggests that children play and/or exercise for at least one hour daily or on most days. This is very clear and unambiguous. One hour a day.

3. Eat the right kinds of fats

Choosing and cooking with healthier fats (olive oil, vegetable oils) and severely limiting unhealthy fats (hydrogenated fats, saturated fats) are strongly recommended. Trans fats (listed in the ingredients section as partially hydrogenated oils) are found in more products than you can imagine. They are used to make almost all processed foods such as breads, cookies, crackers, cakes, waffles, pancakes, doughnuts, bakery products, fried foods and fast food. Foods that contain these trans fats should be SEVERELY limited. Calories from trans fats should be kept below 1% of total calories. That is less than one unhealthy, store-bought cookie a day. This is a huge departure from the old guidelines and one of the most important recommendations.

4. Whole grains offer valuable nutrients and fiber

Whole grains (oatmeal, whole meal bread, brown rice) need to be increased in our daily diets over refined products (white bread, white rice). They offer fiber and critical nutrients which are lacking in many American diets. At least half of the grain-based products that we consume should be whole grain.

The report emphasizes exercise and balanced eating. Good health isn't about dieting and cutting out entire categories of food. Good health seems to be an elusive mix of exercise, healthy whole foods and very little processed and refined foods. This is actually quite simple on paper. In real life, good nutrition can get complicated. What happens when your children want to snack everyday on extremely unhealthy things that all their friends are eating? Kids are kids, and kids snack. It really helps that the school system is making changes to help limit the bad choices. We, as parents then need to pay attention to serving the healthiest array of fresh foods possible the rest of the day.

Terry O'Hara is a member of the Guilford School System's Health Advisory Committee. She is coordinating a series of articles on Child and Family Nutrition with Dr. Robert Nolfo, MD, FAAP. Dr. Nolfo is a Guilford Pediatrician and the Medical Advisor for the Guilford Public Schools.