

## Dietary Guidelines for Americans Frequently Asked Questions

### *What is the Dietary Guidelines for Americans?*

- The Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) provides the scientific underpinning for many federal, state, local, non-profit, health professional, industry, and other programs, policies, guidelines, educational materials, and practices, including:
  - National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, and Smart Snacks (à la carte, vending, school stores, and in-school fundraisers)
  - Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) education and food packages
  - Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)
  - Department of Defense Food Service Facilities guidelines, Commissary Nutrition Guide Program (education), Go for Green Program (education), Child Development Center menus
  - Thrifty Food Plan, the basis for the benefit amount for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps)
  - Food Service Guidelines for Federal Facilities, which are used as guidelines across the country for vending and food service operations in public and private institutional settings like hospitals, food banks, and universities
  - Senior Nutrition Programs (congregate and home-delivered meals)
  - SNAP-Ed, Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP), and Cooperative Extension
  - Local and state health department programs and education
  - My Plate and other nutrition education resources developed and used by health care providers, nutrition counselors, early childcare providers, teachers, and others
- The Dietary Guidelines for Americans results in greater consistency for nutrition recommendations between programs and jurisdictions, which increases efficiency and reduces costs for food manufacturers and service operators.
- The Dietary Guidelines for Americans has been jointly developed and published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services every five years, starting in 1980 and codified in the 1990 National Nutrition Monitoring and Related Research Act. In 2015, HHS and USDA jointly released the eighth edition of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, and they are in the process of developing the 2020 edition. The agencies' recommendations are based on a review of the evidence by the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee, a group of experts nominated through an open solicitation process.

### *Why is it important that the 2020 Guidelines include pregnant women, infants, and young children?*

- As mandated by the 2014 farm bill, the 2020 Dietary Guidelines will include recommendations for pregnant women and children under two for the first time.
- A healthy diet during pregnancy and the first years of a child's life has a significant impact on growth and development and risk for chronic disease in childhood and later in life.
- Early childhood is a crucial period for building healthy eating habits and laying the foundation for lifelong good health.

### *What is the role of diet in overall health and health care costs?*

- A healthy diet is one of the best ways to lower the risk of disease, early death, and health care spending.
- Across the United States, more than two out of three adults and one out of three children and teens (ages 2–19) are overweight or obese—and one in 11 young children (ages 2–5) are obese.
- Obesity costs our nation more than \$150 billion in health care costs annually and billions more in lost productivity. Being overweight or obese is the leading cause of medical disqualifications for military service, disqualifying nearly one-quarter of service applicants.
- Heart disease is our nation's number-one killer and costliest chronic disease, with health care spending at \$318 billion annually. It is 80 percent preventable by healthy lifestyle, including a nutritious diet.
- Nearly half of adults have diabetes or prediabetes, and roughly half of adults have high blood pressure, a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke. Health care costs for diabetes reach \$245 billion annually. Furthermore, 13 cancers, including breast, colorectal, esophageal, and uterine, are linked to overweight or obesity.

### *How is the DGA developed to ensure integrity?*

- Before the experts on the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee review the evidence, they establish criteria for the studies they will include and exclude in their analysis. These criteria are publicly available in the Committee's scientific report and the Nutrition Evidence Library. This step ensures that the Committee is not biased in its selection of studies and that its recommendations are based on well-designed studies.
- Nutrition recommendations are based on what's called the preponderance of evidence, which is the totality of scientific evidence. That includes controlled trials that randomly assign people to different diets, cohort studies that track thousands of people for years, and other types of evidence.
- While the experts who develop the DGA consider randomized controlled trials when available, there are fewer of these types of studies because it is difficult for researchers to get thousands of people to change what they eat and maintain the changes for years. Over time, participants often change or revert to their usual diets. Randomized

controlled trials are also far more expensive and, at times, may not be ethical. Because of these challenges, it is important to consider evidence from different types of studies.

- Occasionally, the media will report on a study that contradicts the larger body of evidence. While these studies typically receive the most media attention, it is important to determine whether their methodology is sound and how the results fit within the totality of the evidence. For example, a few poorly designed studies that fail to detect a link between high-sodium diets and high blood pressure need to be put into context among the hundred studies that do find a link.
- There is a difference between conflict of interest, bias, and expertise. Being an expert—based on years of academic research in one area of nutrition science—does not constitute bias or a conflict of interest. However, conducting research that is funded by parties with a commercial interest in the outcome *is* a conflict of interest. Analyses of such studies find that they typically lead to biased conclusions. Ideally, DGA members should have no competing financial interests, such as major funding from food industry sectors. At a minimum, any such conflicts should be disclosed.
- The rigorous, open, and transparent process for developing the Guidelines allows for input from all interested stakeholders, which strengthens the quality of and trust in the resulting recommendations.
- Many respected health organizations develop their own nutrition recommendations, and those play an important role in population-level dietary advice. While many of these nutrition recommendations have similar and strong scientific practices, the DGA provides a synchronous yet unique role in that the platform and reach of the DGA affects all Americans.

For more information, contact the National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity at 202-777-8352 or [nana@cspinet.org](mailto:nana@cspinet.org).

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