

POLICY FOCUS

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United States Dietary Guidelines— A Recipe for Health or Harm?

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HIGHLIGHT

The government publishes dietary guidelines that are supposed to improve public health, but they often inadvertently **manipulate** the food market and erode public trust in the same government institutions authoring them. Although most Americans don't follow the guidelines closely, healthcare workers rely on these guidelines for nutrition advice, and all federal food assistance programs, including school feeding programs, prison menus, and military diets, are based on the guidelines.

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. government introduced the Dietary Guidelines in 1980, and they are revised every five years, as required by public law. The most recent **edition** was published in 2020. Even though millions of tax dollars have been invested in these government eating plans and programs, most Americans don't adhere to the guidelines, and some markers of health risk directly related to diet have actually gotten worse since the debut of the Dietary Guidelines:

- **Obesity:** The prevalence of obesity has increased significantly in both adults and

children since the 1980s. According to the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC), in 1980, only about 15 percent of adults in the U.S. were obese, whereas in 2020, that number had risen to over 42 percent. In children, the prevalence of obesity has also increased from about 7 percent in 1980 to over 19 percent in 2019, despite the fact that today a larger percentage of children take part in school feeding programs, which do, ostensibly, comply with the Dietary Guidelines.

- **Type II diabetes:** The incidence of type II diabetes has increased since the 1980s from about [5.5 million Americans](#) to more than [37 million](#).
- **High blood pressure:** The prevalence of high blood pressure has also increased since the 1980s from about [18 percent](#) of U.S. adults to roughly [47 percent](#).

Let's look at eggs, for example. Several decades ago, the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC) (which is the interagency committee responsible for issuing the guidelines every five years), the American Heart Association, and other independent organizations endorsed studies published between the 1970s and 1980s, which wrongly concluded that eggs were a risky food to eat regularly.

By law, the DGAC is required to base its recommendations on the “preponderance of scientific and medical knowledge which is current at the time the report is prepared.” The prevailing science on eggs at the time, which we now know was incomplete, led people to believe that eggs will raise their blood cholesterol levels and increase the risk of heart disease. This caused fewer people to buy and eat eggs for several

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MORE INFORMATION

According to a 2019 report by the CDC, only [1 in 10 Americans meets the recommendations](#) of the U.S. Dietary Guidelines. The report, using data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), also found that only 9.3 percent of adults in the U.S. meet the daily recommended intake of vegetables, and only 12.2 percent meet the recommended intake of fruit.

Some may suggest that this is because so few follow the Guidelines. Yet, considering the negative effects that a federal recall, warning label, or even a new public health study can have on a particular product, these dietary guidelines do influence the way Americans eat.

decades—essentially robbing consumers of an affordable and extremely nutritious source of protein.

Egg consumption has only recently started to increase. And that's after the American Egg Board (AEB), a national marketing organization funded by egg producers, spent millions on a [range of promotional marketing](#) to correct government misinformation and communicate to Americans that eggs were safe and healthy.

To be fair, science is always evolving. Pregnant women used to have martinis in the afternoon and smoke cigarettes without a second thought but today, we know better. The issue, especially with nutrition, is that every body is

different and has specific dietary needs and vitamin deficiencies. These particularities are entirely dependent on both genetics and lifestyle. It's also important to remember that nutrition science is extremely flawed as nutrition studies involve people self-reporting their diets and most people don't tell the entire truth about what they eat and drink.

The Dietary Guidelines simply don't (and can't!) account for these differences. Instead, the government provides general one-size-fits-all recommendations, which cost the American taxpayer millions of dollars without making any public health improvements. At least according to the data.

As a result of the government recommending Americans reduce their fat intake, many began to fear fat in their diet and tried to avoid it as much as possible. This led to the widespread adoption of low-fat and fat-free diets, as well as a surge in the consumption of high-sugar processed foods marketed as “low-fat” or “fat-free” which we still see today on store shelves. Although fat in diets went down, sugar intake increased causing a different set of health risks.

Shortly after the debut of the Dietary Guidelines, there was a steady and noticeable increase in obesity rates in children and adults over several decades. Correlation vs. causation is up for debate, especially because society has changed so much (more cars and television viewing, fewer smokers, more air conditioning, more automation and robotics leading to less physically laborious jobs, greater access to and lower cost foods, etc.), but making recommendations that influence families to change their diets for the worse has certainly not helped.

The Dietary Guidelines' fat alarmism also had a lasting impact on how Americans thought about normal components of their diet. Similar to eggs, foods high in fat got a bad rap. As a result of the government

recommending Americans reduce their fat intake, many began to fear fat in their diet and tried to avoid it as much as possible. This led to the widespread adoption of low-fat and fat-free diets, as well as a surge in the consumption of high-sugar processed foods marketed as “low-fat” or “fat-free” which we still see today on store shelves. Although **fat in diets went down, sugar intake increased** causing a different set of health risks.

Another subsequent, negative effect of moving away from traditional fats like butter and beef tallow was the increase in the amount of trans-fats Americans ate. Trans fats were originally invented as a “better” fat and

became a common ingredient in processed foods. Years later, trans-fats were found to **significantly increase** heart-health risks leading the FDA to ban them in 2020.

RED MEAT SCARE

Red meat is a rather large bucket of products, ranging from beef to pork and lamb. Implying that these many types of meats come with identical health risks, without parsing out how cooking temperatures and cooking style greatly affect the health value, is not only irresponsible to the nation's health, but it's also an attack on the red meat economy.

Beef is only barely mentioned in the USDA's Healthy Recommended Diet plan, with lean meats being the preferred cut, despite red

meat containing important **nutrients** like Vitamin B12, iron, zinc, and certain amino acids. This omission is no accident as the DGAC has long been influenced by green activists and anti-meat advocates who want the DGAC to nudge Americans toward a plant-based diet. And while **around half** of Americans say they are trying to reduce their meat consumption and a **quarter of Americans between the ages of 25 and 34** say they are vegetarians or vegans, the **USDA reports** that Americans still consumed almost 60 pounds lbs of beef per person in 2022. In other words, meat is still very popular.

Traditional cow milk faces a lot of competition these days with the introduction of plant-based “milk” products like almond, oat, soy, and many other types. Yet despite this positive expansion of consumer choice, the USDA, which oversees the federal school milk program, bans milk alternatives in schools despite a large percentage of African-Americans, Native Americans, and children of Asian descent being lactose intolerant.

DAIRY MISINFORMATION IN SCHOOLS

Despite the DGAC’s efforts to reduce meat consumption, cow milk is another matter. Cow milk is healthy. It has **13 essential nutrients**, including protein, zinc, selenium, and vitamins A and D, which support a healthy immune system, especially for children, and it remains a relatively inexpensive source of protein. Yet traditional cow milk faces a lot of competition these days with the introduction of plant-based “milk” products like almond, oat, soy, and many other types. Yet despite this positive expansion of consumer choice, the USDA doesn’t advocate for these particular plant-based products. In fact, the **U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)**, which oversees the federal school milk program, bans milk alternatives in schools despite a large percentage of African-Americans, Native Americans, and children of Asian descent being lactose intolerant.

This leaves many consumers confused and asking why a plant-based diet is good when it comes to choosing tofu over steak, but it isn’t good when choosing soy milk over cow milk. These sorts of inconsistencies point to crony capitalism and protectionism, not science-based advice on nutrition.

HEALTH SHOULDN’T BE POLITICAL

In a January 2023 statement, the DGAC **promised to apply** “a health equity lens throughout its evidence review to ensure factors such as socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity,

and culture are described and considered to the greatest extent possible based on the information provided in the scientific literature and data.” What does this mean, exactly?

The Department of Health and Human Services defines “health equity” as “the state in which everyone has a fair and just opportunity to attain their highest level of health.” That might seem like a reasonable and noble goal, but the government can only do so much. Ultimately, humans are in charge of their own health by choosing to eat well, get moderate exercise, and monitor for diseases that might be genetic. Of course, humans don’t always do the right and healthy thing but suggesting the government can control health outcomes is simply folly and will ultimately fail to serve those who are vulnerable.

The DGAC’s mission is clear. It is supposed to gather and weigh the application of new studies and findings and inform the

American public on ways they can improve their health based on scientific evidence. If they haven't historically been doing this and considering the various needs of particular demographic communities that make up the American population, what have they been doing? The focus of the Guidelines, if they must exist, should be on accounting for new developments in nutrition and health science for all Americans.

ALCOHOL FEARMONGERING

The science on alcohol consumption is complicated. For example, people who drank small amounts of alcohol regularly were found to have a **lower risk for heart disease** than those who didn't. Another 12-year study found **a modest increase in alcohol was associated with lower chances** for heart disease.

The impact of alcohol consumption on one's health, similar to red meat, depends on your personal medical history, body makeup, and genetic disposition. And suggesting to people that imbibing even small amounts of alcohol is dangerous is the type of thing that takes the joy out of enjoyable activities—which is also good for one's health.

Most Americans **drink alcohol occasionally**, and the Dietary Guidelines do recognize that reality. They **recommend** that adults of legal drinking age should choose either to not drink or to drink in moderation by limiting intake to two drinks or less in a day for men or one drink or less in a day for women, on days they choose to drink. That recommendation was based on the **sixty studies that met the Dietary Guidelines standards for inclusion**.

The impact of alcohol consumption on one's health, similar to red meat, depends on your personal medical history, body makeup, and genetic disposition. For a healthy adult, having multiple drinks at an event, or the occasional glass of wine with dinner, is not a serious

public health concern. Broadly discouraging habits that have a negligible impact on a person's health is not helping people take other health critiques or recommendations more seriously. And suggesting to people that imbibing even small amounts of alcohol is dangerous is the type of thing that takes the joy out of enjoyable activities—which is also good for one's health.

NUTRITION SHOULD BE TAILORED TO THE INDIVIDUAL

Nutrition is dynamic and confusing and the government flip-flopping on the guidance it offers doesn't help. One minute, Americans are told eggs are unhealthy; the next, healthy. Meat is good, then bad. Fat should be avoided, then it's important to keep people satiated. It's frustrating.

While it would be nice for Americans to have some reliable advice, the human body is complicated and genetics play a big role in health. The dietary guidelines simply can't provide individualized instruction. What's more concerning is that the dietary guidelines process has become politicized.

Today, consumers can figure out the diet that's best for them by using a variety of local and online sources. This precision nutrition strategy has democratized and modernized the process of staying healthy and has made the audience for the Dietary Guidelines much more narrow if not entirely nonexistent. It's time to do away with this dinosaur for good, and for the betterment of the American public.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Get Informed

Learn more about the nutrition policy. Visit:

- [Deep Nutrition](#)
- [The Big Fat Surprise: Why Butter, Meat and Cheese Belong in a Healthy Diet](#)
- [IWF on Wellness](#)

Talk to Your Friends

Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Share this information, tell them about what's going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

Become a Leader in the Community

Start an Independent Women's Network chapter group so you can get together with friends each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few motivated people can change the world.

Remain Engaged Politically

Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your Representatives know your opinions. After all, they are supposed to work for you!

Connect with IWF! Follow us on:

WE RELY ON THE SUPPORT OF PEOPLE LIKE YOU!

Please visit us on our website iwf.org to get more information and consider making a donation to IWF.

ABOUT INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM

Independent Women's Forum (IWF) is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility. IWF, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.