

Dietary Guidelines Should Make Sense For Kids Too

HARRISBURG (Dauphin Co.) — If you're a healthy adult, the USDA's Dietary Guidelines for Americans were written with you in mind. In seven points, the Guidelines give a framework to use for developing wise eating habits that may reduce your risk of chronic disease.

The guidelines, most recently revised in 1990, reduced mountains of nutrition research and layers of nutrition controversy to a list that most of us can apply fairly easily to our everyday eating habits. It sounds simple enough — eat a variety of foods, maintain healthy weight, choose a diet that's low in fat, saturated fat and cholesterol and one with plenty of vegetables, fruits and grain products, while using sugars, salt, sodium and alcoholic beverages in moderation. This advice was meant to be applied over a period of time, allowing for moderate use of a variety of foods.

The Dietary Guidelines have been widely used as a reasonable basis for nutrition decisions by the federal government, corporations and by consumers trying to make a case for moderation in making healthy food choices. For most healthy adults the advice is reasonable.

Children under the age of two have been exempted from the Dietary Guidelines. In the critical growth and development spurt from birth to two years, healthy children need a high fat diet (50% of their energy from fat) to ensure they get enough calories and essential fatty acids for neurological development. Breast milk or formula is the first source of balanced nutrition for a baby. As a child grows, appropriate forms of such nutrient-dense foods as whole grains, meats, dairy products and fruits and vegetables are added.

The government had advised that the Dietary Guidelines are appropriate from age two on. Actually, a child's second birthday is just one milestone in growth and development. Rather than abruptly shifting a child's diet at age two, the transition needs to be gradual to adulthood. From age two until they stop growing, kids still need relatively more food energy and essential nutrients in their diets than they will as adults.

Canada has already revised its Nutrition Recommendations to give more flexible food choices from growing children and adolescents. According to the Report of the Joint Working Group of the Canadian pediatric Society and Health Canada, growing children are advised to make a gradual transition from a high-fat diet to the adult recommendations of less than 30% calories from fat and less than 10% from saturated fat. While children can eat the same foods, including those in lower fat, as the result of the family, parents are advised to allow children to select nutrient-dense higher fat foods more often than adults and not to restrict certain foods because of fat content.

The Canadians recognized that current recommendations could not be applied to children because they are not little adults — they have unique caloric and nutrient needs. The Canadian goal was to improve guidelines of food choices that meet children's needs for adequate energy and nutrients to ensure long-term growth and

development, focusing on the total diet instead of single nutrients.

As a result, the general application of the U.S. Dietary Guidelines is now being questioned, especially in regard to fat intake restrictions. Instead of taking a restrictive approach, many nutritionists are emphasizing the need to ensure that children get both adequate energy and the right mix of nutrients for growth. In the U.S., the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children not consume less than 30% calories from fat and the American Dietetic Association has advised that the U.S. chart distinct guidelines for children.

If low-fat foods are substituted for more energy dense foods, kids need to add calories from other energy sources — preferably complex carbohydrates. But whole grain bread, rice and pasta, for example are bulkier and less energy dense than the higher-fat foods they may be replacing. Kids may eat less or fill up on "empty-caloric" snacks. Every bite of food begins to count and a child's diet needs to be carefully monitored to make sure there are enough nutrients.

Ensuring that children meet these needs can be challenging for parents. Preschool age children may appear to have erratic eating habits, preferring one food to the exclusion of all others or eating what seems to be tiny amounts of food. But frustrated parents should

take heart — research has shown that in a 24-hour period, kids will usually self-select a varied diet of the nutrients they need. They may not eat much at any one time, but instead need to eat more frequently to get the nutrients and energy they need. The key is to provide a wide variety of food choices.

As children grow closer to adulthood, their growth is slower, but steady. In the years before puberty, many kids gain some fat and become more sensitive about body image. But restrictive eating and dieting may delay normal growth and the onset of puberty.

Adolescents, girls in particular, are especially vulnerable to choosing inadequate diets. Girls from age 10 to 12 and in their young teens are consistently reported to get too little calcium, iron and zinc from the foods they eat. For example, a young teen girl needs at least 1200 mg calcium per day, the equivalent of four 8-ounce cups of milk or yogurt. But many are more aware of limiting calories than getting enough calcium, let alone making the effort to eat more of less dense, but acknowledge sources of calcium like green leafy vegetables.

Specific Dietary Guidelines for children would distinguish their special food needs from those healthy adults. Children are not little adults. Our national Dietary Guidelines should be amended to reflect.



Trevor Steinbach, National Dairy Council (left), presented an award to Jan Stanton, director, Dairy Council, for her organization's 75 years of outstanding achievement in nutrition education. The presentation was made at the Buck Hotel in Feasterville at a special celebration. Formed in 1920, Dairy Council was created to provide free milk to undernourished school children. Today, the organization works with educators and health professionals in 25 counties throughout the tri-state area, supplying nutrition information on such topics as: school breakfast, osteoporosis, diet and weight control. Dairy Council is funded by area dairy farmers.



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