



FOOD

# Nutrition experts criticize new federal dietary guidelines

By Megan Scudellari

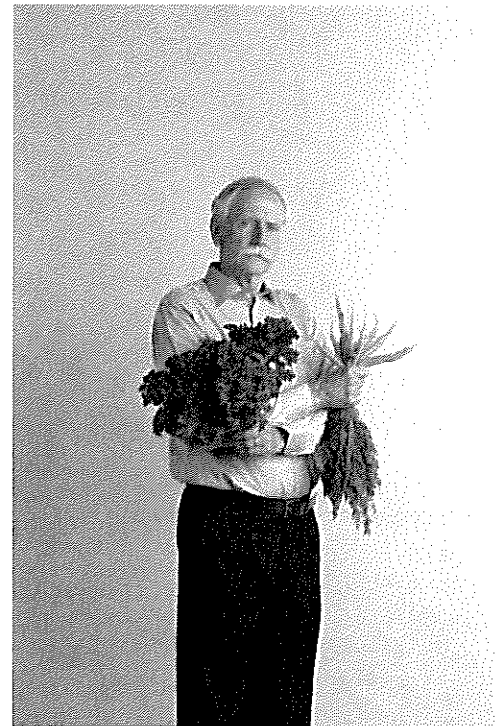
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Last week, the government released the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, a set of national nutrition standards that guide public nutrition programs, school lunch menus, food labels, dietitian recommendations, and more.

According to the federal agencies that produced the report, this newest edition of the Dietary Guidelines is “grounded in the most current scientific evidence.”

Nutrition researchers beg to differ.

“A lot of people are deeply troubled by it,” says Walter Willett, chair of the department of nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health. “There are very clear scientific conclusions about red meat and soda and other sugar-sweetened beverages that were basically absent from the final Dietary Guidelines.”



DAVE BRADLEY

**Walter Willett is chair of the department of nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health.**

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“This is definitely a turn for the worse,” adds Ricardo Salvador, director of the Food and Environment Program at the Union of Concerned Scientists. “Now we have dietary guidelines, intended to serve the public interest, which instead protect the interest of agribusiness.”

In February 2015, an Advisory Committee of nutrition, health, and medical experts produced a report with diet recommendations based on the best available scientific evidence. That report, however, was not the last word. The US Department of Health and Human Services and the US Department of Agriculture subsequently used the report, along with input from the public and others, to write the guidelines.

That process opens the door for politics and special interest groups to influence the final outcome, researchers argue. “Everybody knows what’s been going on behind the scenes,” says Salvador, such as pressure from the meat industry on Congress and the Secretary of Agriculture.

This year, for example, there were notable differences between the Advisory Committee’s recommendations and the final guidelines. According to scientific evidence, individuals should reduce their consumption of red and processed meats and sugar-sweetened beverages, such as soda, to prevent chronic diseases. The scientific evidence for those two recommendations is “so clear, so strong,” says Willett — yet neither recommendation was included in the final guidelines.

For the first time, the guidelines did set an upper limit for sugar intake, recommending an intake of less than 10 percent of calories per day from added sugars. That recommendation could lead to a new “added sugars” line on food labels, which the FDA proposed earlier this

year. Yet the guidelines did not specifically recommend individuals limit sugar-sweetened beverages, the primary source of added sugar in American diets.

In general, the guidelines are watered down, says Kelly Toups, a dietitian and program manager with the nutrition nonprofit Oldways. They obscure the foods Americans should eat less of by using nutrients as a “cop out,” she says, such as recommending people “eat less saturated fat” instead of “eat less red meat.”

The final guidelines also don't include the Advisory Committee's emphasis on sustainability of the food supply, including the need to reduce portions of beef, cited as “the single food with the greatest projected impact on the environment.”

“This is virtual proof that the USDA is not allowed to say anything negative about red meat,” says Willett. “The basic censorship of the report from the Advisory Committee is deeply troublesome.”

Still, there were positive diet recommendations in the Dietary Guidelines, Willett and others agree. In addition to limiting added sugar, the new guidelines removed the upper limit for total dietary fat, a past recommendation that led many dietitians to recommend carbohydrates in place of fat, a substitution that may have fueled the obesity epidemic .

And the guidelines encourage individuals to focus on healthy dietary patterns rather than calorie intake or specific foods. “The guidelines have some tremendously important messages, including that overall we should be eating way more fruits and vegetables than we've been eating as a country,” says Curt Ellis, cofounder and CEO of FoodCorps, a national nonprofit that promotes healthy eating in schools.

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In the future, added transparency and public pressure could help remove industry influence from the guidelines, says Salvador. “Hopefully next time we can do better.”

For that, we'll have to wait for 2021, when the next set of guidelines is due out.