

Exploring the 2025–2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans

On January 7, 2026, the United States Departments of Agriculture (USDA) and of Health and Human Services (HHS) jointly released the [2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#) (DGAs). HHS described this 10th edition as the ‘most significant reset of federal nutrition policy in decades,’ suggesting that it represents a major shift from previous versions. High-level changes include:

Key Updates: 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans

- 1. Prioritize protein:** The new DGAs prioritize protein at every meal and set a healthy range of protein intake at 1.2-1.6 g/kg body weight per day, up to double the current RDA set at 0.8 g/kg body weight. They emphasize flexibility across both animal and plant food sources, including red meat and dairy products.
- 2. Eat real food:** There is an emphasis on ‘Eat Real Food’ with a focus on whole, naturally nutrient-dense foods, high-quality protein, vegetables and fruit, full-fat dairy, healthy fats and whole grains. In fact, they encourage that all grain choices be whole grain, instead of only half as per previous guidance.
- 3. Limit or avoid:** There is a strong message to avoid highly processed foods and added sugars, limit refined carbohydrates and to maintain the 10% limit on saturated fat. In fact, it is the first U.S. dietary guidelines to address intakes of processed food and health. The guidance on how much alcohol to consume is less specific than before, shifting from a daily limit of up to 2 drinks per day for men and 1 drink per day for women, to simply encouraging people to consume less alcohol for better health.

The DGA report acknowledges that more research is needed to better define and classify ‘highly processed’ or ‘ultra-processed’ foods and to clarify their relationship with health outcomes. The intent of this guidance is to encourage more minimally processed, nutrient-dense foods, and home prepared meals, that include both animal and plant choices.

- 4. A new graphic:** The visual changed significantly, moving away from the previous My Plate graphic to an inverted pyramid. At the top are *Protein, Dairy and Healthy Fats* and *Vegetables and Fruit*, at the bottom are *Whole Grains*. While the visual image seems to be primarily recommending animal-sourced foods, the complementary written guidance takes a balanced approach. The DGAs emphasize choice across both animal and plant-based foods. For example, the protein guidance states:

- **Consume a variety of protein foods from animal sources, including eggs, poultry, seafood, and red meat, as well as a variety of plant-sourced protein foods, including beans, peas, lentils, legumes, nuts, seeds, and soy.**



- 5. Less focus on health equity:** Unlike previous versions, these DGAs did not apply health equity as the ‘central lens’ in evaluating the scientific evidence. Instead, they aim to solely provide scientific evidence that can later be adapted into policies and programs relevant to different cultural, ethnic and socioeconomic contexts.

Protein & Nutrient Adequacy: Why the stronger focus?

The new DGAs prioritize whole, high-quality, nutrient-dense protein foods, within a healthy eating pattern, that includes both animal and plant-based foods. The scientific review focused on body weight, adult weight management, and nutrient adequacy across life stages. The stronger emphasis on protein and nutrient adequacy reflects the following considerations:

- 1. Higher protein for optimal health:** The DGAs recommend a healthy range of protein intake of 1.2 to 1.6 g/kg body weight versus the current RDA of 0.8 g/kg, which was set to meet minimum protein needs rather than support optimal health. The higher protein requirements are especially important for older adults to maintain optimal function.
- 2. Randomized Control Trials (RCTs):** Earlier DGAs did not fully reflect the growing evidence from RCTs showing the value of high-quality, nutrient-dense protein in a healthy eating pattern. In contrast, the current report evaluated evidence from RCT research (that tightly controlled food intake with specific health outcomes) to help shape food-based recommendations.
- 3. Protein quality:** Protein quality relates to how well a food provides the essential amino acids (EAA) the body needs, how digestible and concentrated the EAAs are, and how effectively they support human requirements. Animal source proteins, such as red meat and dairy, stand out in the DGAs, because substantial evidence shows they are high-quality protein sources, providing all the essential amino acids in proportions that are readily used by the body.

The *Appendices* report suggests that previous DGAs have encouraged greater reliance on plant-based proteins over animal-source foods to reduce saturated fat and increase fiber. The authors argue that this shift may have overlooked important differences in nutrient-density, protein quality, and key micronutrients, such as iron and zinc. They further suggest that the previous MyPlate *protein ounce equivalents* implies nutritional equivalence between animal and plant proteins, despite differences in protein quality and essential amino acid density. The report notes that meat, eggs, and milk are important sources of essential nutrients that may be more difficult to obtain from plant-based foods alone.

- 4. Nutrient adequacy:** The stronger emphasis on nutrient-dense protein foods is not only about protein itself, but also about the important package of vitamins and minerals that these foods offer such as iron, zinc, magnesium, vitamin B12, vitamin D, and calcium. In particular, animal source foods 'not only provide EAA, they offer substantial amounts of highly bioavailable essential micronutrients,' that are especially important for at risk populations.

Reflections for Canada

Some of the themes in the new U.S. dietary guidelines are relevant to Canada, particularly the emphasis on high-quality, nutrient dense whole food proteins, and the important role of animal-source foods within a balanced eating pattern.

- Contrary to popular opinion, on average Canadians do not consume too much protein. In fact, almost 20% of adults aged 19-64, and 32% aged 65 and older eat less protein than the RDA.
- Canada's population is aging rapidly; 1 in 4 Canadians will be over the age of 65 by the year 2040. Frailty, sarcopenia and falls are common in older adults, and protein quality, quantity and exercise play a key role in preventing and reversing muscle loss. Interestingly, research suggests that animal proteins have a greater ability to enhance muscle protein synthesis rate and support muscle mass than plant-based proteins. The lower anabolic response to plant proteins is due to the lower digestibility and incomplete amino acid profile.
- The Protein Foods group in Canada's Food Guide includes meat, beans, peas, lentils, eggs, fish, seafood and dairy products. The Guide encourages Canadians to choose more plant-based foods. The strong emphasis on plant foods may decrease nutrient adequacy, especially for certain population groups such as school-aged children, women and older adults.

- Nutrient adequacy is also a concern in Canada. National nutrition data shows that many Canadian adults do not meet recommendations for several key nutrients and may be at risk for inadequacy. For example, nearly 30% of women aged 19-50 have prevalence of inadequate iron intake from food and a significant proportion of Canadian adults have inadequate zinc intakes.

There is also substantial evidence that iron, zinc and vitamin B12 are shortfall nutrients for many school-aged children in Canada, and one in four teen girls is estimated to be iron deficient. Taken together, these findings reinforce the importance of balancing of high-quality, nutrient-dense proteins, from both animal and plant sources, to support optimal health and nutrient adequacy.

- Canadian research suggests that a balance of animal and plant-based protein foods, including red meat, is associated with better overall diet quality than dietary patterns high in either animal or plant protein alone.
- How about saturated fat? The Canadian Community Health Survey data shows that saturated fat accounts for 10.4% of total calorie intake among Canadian adults. Importantly, 44.3% of calories from saturated fat come from foods not in the food guide, and only 9% comes from unprocessed red meat, such as fresh beef or pork. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that saturated fat should be no more than 10% of total energy, however emerging research on the health impact of saturated fat may challenge the longstanding WHO recommendation.
- Canadians also need to prioritize vegetables, fruit, whole grain, healthy fats and decrease intake of highly processed foods.

Why do dietary guidelines matter?

Dietary guidelines offer evidence-based direction on food choices and eating patterns that promote health and support nutrient adequacy. They serve as an important foundation for nutrition policy, programs, and health professionals, and are translated into practical food and nutrition guidance for the public. In Canada and the U.S. food and nutrition guidance has evolved over many decades, with Canada's *Official Food Rules* in 1942, and the first U.S. food guide in 1916. The first *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* were published in 1980 and are updated every five years.

Wrap up

As Canada looks ahead to future dietary guidance, the new DGAs may offer a useful lens for reflection. Their emphasis on protein quality, nutrient adequacy, and nutrient dense whole foods, including animal source foods, may be especially relevant in considering the nutrition needs of Canadians.

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