

From plate to pyramid, understanding the new dietary guidelines

The USDA has released the 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Allison Miner, food systems expert, discusses key updates and visual representations.

FAIRFAX , VA, UNITED STATES, February 17, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Fruits, vegetables, grains,

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Allison Miner, EdD, RDN

proteins, and dairy: These are the basic food groups that make up a balanced diet. In 2011, MyPlate was introduced as the primary visual dietary guide for Americans on how to portion these food groups. The release of the [2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#) brought back a pyramid-shaped graphic.

In honor of National Let's All Eat Right Day, food systems expert [Allison Miner](#), a licensed dietitian and assistant professor in the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies, clarifies key guidance updates and answers questions about the reverse from MyPlate back to the pyramid.

Q: How do the new dietary guidelines differ from the previous version?

The food group portioning largely remains similar to its predecessor, but there are key updates:

—Protein: The latest guidelines double the previous recommendation which has stood for over 80 years. The type of protein recommended emphasizes animal protein over plant-based.

—Dairy: Emphasis is now on full-fat dairy, whereas previous guidance recommended non-fat or low-fat dairy for children over two and adults.

—Fruits and vegetables: The recommendation is essentially the same, with an approximately half-cup increase in vegetables.

—Grains: The amount of grain recommended has not changed significantly. The emphasis has changed, however. The shift is toward whole grains and away from refined/highly processed grains. There is strong evidence that whole grains are healthier.

In summary, the biggest changes are the higher amount of protein recommended, the increased recommendation for animal-derived proteins, and emphasis on full-fat dairy.

Q: What are ultra-processed foods and are they “bad”?

The phrase “ultra-processed foods” is often thrown around to mean what most think of as “junk” foods: potato chips, packaged cookies, instant noodles, ice cream. But, the majority of our food undergoes some form of processing, meaning that the food item has undergone industrial processing that alters it from its original state. In fact, about 75% of food products are considered ultra-processed. Pre-cooking, adding preservatives, artificial coloring, and sugar and salt additives are common in food processing across the board. The ultra-processed foods packed high in saturated fat, sodium, and sugar, and lower in water and fiber are the ones to be wary of. These are the foods that increase risk of chronic illnesses like diabetes and heart disease.

Processed foods can still contribute positively to a healthy dietary pattern. The takeaway isn’t “avoid all processed foods,” but rather to focus on overall nutrient quality and how that food fits into the whole diet. Limited amounts of potato chips can be part of a healthy diet that includes whole grains, low-fat dairy, fruits, vegetables, and plant-based protein.

For example, foods like prepackaged whole-grain bread, low-fat yogurts, and soy milk are technically ultra-processed, but are considered beneficial to one’s health.

Q: What does research say about red meat?

One of the most notable updates to the dietary guidelines is the protein section and the promotion of red meat. Animal protein was always part of previous recommendations, but there was guidance to limit it due to its higher saturated fat content. There is limited scientific evidence that high animal foods are healthier for the general population than plant-based protein. The strength of evidence is stronger that processed red meat such as bacon, sausage, and deli meats are linked to several negative health outcomes including increased risk of heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, obesity, some cancers, and even premature death.

Scientific evidence consistently supports plant-based protein as healthier for individuals and for the planet.

It is important to note that portion size, frequency, and preparation methods including what foods are being excluded (fruits, vegetables, whole grains) should be factored in when deciding what foods to include as part of a healthy diet.

Q: What does research say about full-fat dairy?

The new dietary guidelines also recommend full-fat dairy over lower-fat alternatives, but research has mixed findings on benefits versus consequences. Dairy provides nutrients such as protein, several vitamins and minerals — all important to bone health and overall nutrition. However, full-fat dairy contains more saturated fat, which can raise LDL (“bad”) cholesterol and increase cardiovascular risk. Low-fat dairy alternatives provide the same benefits while lowering the amount of saturated fat.

For adults whose overall diet is already low in saturated fat, full-fat dairy can fit as well. The key is to consider the whole dietary pattern rather than focusing on a single food.

Q: What is the new inverted food pyramid?

The food pyramid is a visual of what the average individual should consume in a single day. It is meant to be a basic guide on portion sizes for each food group, the larger sections represent the food groups that should comprise the majority of a person's daily diet, and as the sections decrease, that indicates the food group portions that should be progressively smaller.

Today's inverted food pyramid is supposed to convey to the public to consume real food over highly processed and packaged food, to prioritize protein and dairy, choose healthy fat and reduce sugar. A key point of clarification is, because whole grains are at the bottom of the pyramid, it appears that guidance says to reduce or eat fewer grains. The graphic could be misleading here because that is not what the recommendations say, which is to increase the portion of whole grains and reduce processed grains.

Different from the original pyramid and MyPlate, this one doesn't convey anything about individual portion size.

Q: Why did the dietary guidelines shift from the pyramid to a plate and back again?

The original food guide pyramid was first introduced in 1992 to be used as a visual guide for the public to easily interpret food guidance from the 1990-1995 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The pyramid visual emphasized two concepts: the base of the pyramid was the widest and represented the largest amount of food Americans should consume. As the pyramid narrowed, so did the recommendation for the amount of food for each successive food group. There was also no visual guidance as to what kind of food in each food group was healthy. Unfortunately, this did not translate well with the public because there was no guidance as to the amount or kind of food recommended in each section of the pyramid.

MyPlate was created in 2011 as the visual for the 2010-2015 DGA and to address these issues. It was scaled to the actual size and portion of what people would normally consume for each of the food groups based on a nine to 11-inch diameter (circular) plate.

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MEDIA INQUIRIES: For reporters who wish to speak to Allison Miner about the 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, please email media contact Mary Cunningham at mcunni7@gmu.edu.

Allison Miner, EdD, MS, RDN, is a licensed dietitian and Assistant Professor in the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies. She has over 30 years of experience in clinical nutrition, education, and community health, specializing in obesity and cardiovascular disease prevention.

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