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Editorial

The 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans: Scientific Progress or Political Agenda?

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On January 7, 2026, the Trump administration, through Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., released the Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2025-2030 (DGAs), marking one of the most significant and controversial shifts in nutritional policy in recent decades. With the central message "Eat Real Food", these new guidelines represent both necessary progress and concerning regression in our understanding of evidence-based nutrition.

For the first time in DGA history, the document explicitly mentions "highly processed foods" as a category to avoid—a long-awaited acknowledgment by the scientific community. This stance marks an important turning point: after decades of focusing on isolated nutrients (fats, carbohydrates, proteins), there is finally recognition that the food matrix and degree of processing are fundamental determinants of health. The guidelines specifically recommend avoiding sugar-sweetened beverages, packaged salty or sweet snacks, and ready-to-eat foods, while establishing that "no amount of added sugars or non-nutritive sweeteners is recommended as part of a healthy diet".

The new guidelines also mark substantial changes in macronutrient recommendations. The recommended protein intake nearly doubles, from 0.8 to 1.2-1.6 grams per kilogram of body weight per day. Additionally, for the first time, full-fat dairy products are recommended over low-fat options, and cooking with butter or beef tallow is suggested as part of "healthy fats". These changes are dramatically visualized in the return of the food pyramid, but inverted: proteins, dairy, and healthy fats occupy the top (widest) portion, while whole grains are relegated to the narrow base.

However, these guidelines present troubling contradictions that undermine their scientific credibility. While maintaining the saturated fat limit at 10% of total daily calories (approximately 22 grams in a 2,000-calorie diet), the new visual pyramid prominently features steak, ground beef, butter, and whole-fat cheese. The math is simple and revealing: three daily servings of full-fat dairy (whole milk, full-fat Greek yogurt, cheddar cheese) already total 17 grams of saturated fat, leaving barely 5 grams for the rest of the day. A single 6-ounce ribeye steak with French fries cooked in beef tallow would completely exceed the daily limit.

Even more concerning is the process by which these guidelines were developed. The Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee, composed of scientific experts who spent two years reviewing over 250,000 studies, presented their Scientific Report in December 2024. However, the Trump administration appointed an additional panel that apparently substantially modified the final recommendations. The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics stated that some recommendations are "not aligned with the current body of evidence," while the American Society for Nutrition expressed concerns about the "lack of transparency regarding the methods, approaches, and objectives of the newly introduced scientific reviews".

Dr. Frank Hu, professor of nutrition and epidemiology at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, aptly summarizes: "The new Guidelines move in the right direction by reinforcing the importance of reducing added sugars and cutting back on refined grains and other highly processed foods. However, there appear to

be several contradictions within the DGAs and between the DGAs and the new pyramid. The mixed messages surrounding saturated-fat-rich foods such as red meat, butter, and beef tallow may lead to confusion and potentially higher intake of saturated fat and increased LDL cholesterol".

The controversy intensifies when considering that the DGAs have direct implications for federal food assistance programs such as SNAP, WIC, and the National School Lunch Program, which serve millions of Americans. The visual prominence of red meats and full-fat dairy products in the pyramid, without clear guidance on frequency or portions to stay within saturated fat limits, could inadvertently increase consumption of these products among the most vulnerable populations.

As nutrition professionals, we must acknowledge both the advances and setbacks. The explicit recognition that ultra-processed foods should be avoided is a significant achievement. For too long, the food industry has exploited loopholes in previous guidelines to promote highly processed products as "healthy" simply because they are low in fat or fortified with vitamins. The new DGAs partially close this gap by emphasizing "real" and minimally processed foods.

The increase in protein recommendations also deserves nuanced consideration. For certain groups—older adults at risk of sarcopenia, people in weight-loss therapies with GLP-1 medications, athletes—higher protein intake is supported by solid evidence. However, most Americans already consume adequate amounts of protein. The real problem is not total amount but distribution: too much protein at dinner, too little at breakfast. Furthermore, the guidelines fail to effectively communicate that plant proteins—legumes, lentils, beans—offer protein along with fiber and folate that Americans desperately need.

The narrative of "ending the war on saturated fats", as Kennedy declared, is deeply problematic. There is no such "war" in modern nutritional science. What exists is a robust consensus, based on decades of epidemiological research, clinical trials, and longitudinal studies, that saturated fats increase LDL cholesterol and, when consumed in excess, increase cardiovascular risk. Major medical organizations—the American Heart Association, the American College of Cardiology—maintain their recommendations to limit saturated fats. Ignoring this evidence in favor of a political narrative is irresponsible.

However, it is crucial to recognize that the debate about saturated fats is more complex than many admit. Evidence suggests that not all sources of saturated fat have the same impact: fermented dairy products like yogurt and cheese may have neutral or even protective effects, while processed meats show stronger associations with cardiovascular risk. The food matrix matters. The guidelines miss the opportunity to communicate this complexity in a way that is useful to the public.

From a global perspective, these guidelines represent a case study of how politics can compromise scientific integrity in public health. While countries like Brazil have adopted guidelines based on degree of processing (NOVA classification), and Chile has implemented front-of-package warning labels with measurable results in reducing consumption of unhealthy products, the United States regresses toward confusing messages that potentially benefit specific industries over public health.

As an international scientific community, our responsibility is clear. First, we must continue generating rigorous evidence on the impact of different dietary patterns on metabolic, cardiovascular, and overall health. Second, we need to communicate this evidence clearly, accessibly, and free from commercial interests. Third, we must advocate for guideline development processes that are transparent, based on systematic reviews of evidence, and protected from undue political interference.

For nutrition professionals working directly with patients and communities, these guidelines present both challenges and opportunities. The challenge is navigating the contradictions and helping people make informed decisions without falling into extremes. The opportunity is using this moment of public confusion to educate about fundamental principles that transcend changing policies: prioritize minimally processed foods, increase consumption of vegetables and fruits, choose whole grains over refined ones, and maintain appropriate caloric balance.

Emerging technologies—from bioelectrical impedance spectroscopy for precise body composition monitoring to continuous glucose monitoring for personalized nutrition—offer us increasingly sophisticated tools to individualize nutritional recommendations beyond generic population guidelines. This data-driven personalization may be the path forward in an era where trust in government guidelines has eroded.

In conclusion, the Dietary Guidelines 2025-2030 represent a profoundly contradictory document: progressive in recognizing ultra-processed foods as a central problem, but regressive in elevating saturated-fat-rich animal products without clear guidance on moderation. It advances in recommending adequate protein but fails to distinguish between plant and animal sources with different implications for health and sustainability. It proclaims to be based on science but was developed through an opaque process that marginalized the work of scientific experts.

Our response as a scientific community must be firm but constructive: continue researching, clearly communicating the evidence, and advocating for nutritional policies that genuinely prioritize public health over political or commercial interests. People deserve dietary guidelines that are clear, consistent, and truly based on the best available evidence. These guidelines, unfortunately, fall short of that fundamental goal.

May this edition of Acta Scientific Nutritional Health inspire a critical, informed, and constructive dialogue on how we, as a global community, can develop and communicate nutritional recommendations that truly serve the health of our populations.