

Reflections on the 2025–2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans

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Diet influences our health as well as our culture and identity. Updates to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) draw considerable attention because eating is one of the most modifiable human behaviors. The interest often goes beyond the United States, as many countries view the DGA as an important reference. Since their first release in 1980, the DGA have been updated every five years (Figure 1). Meanwhile, the Scientific Report that informs each edition has expanded substantially from a 19-page document in 1985 to a comprehensive, protocol-guided review spanning hundreds of pages. This expansion reflects increasing methodological rigor and transparency in the evidence review process. Beyond offering dietary advice, DGA serve as an important foundation for nutrition education, school meals, federal programs, and broader food-system policies. The 2025–2030 DGA continue this tradition by relying on systematic review of existing evidence and incorporating life-course considerations, maintaining their longstanding commitment to evidence-based public health guidance.

Several countries, such as Canada, Japan, and the Nordic nations, have recently updated their guidelines to emphasize food-based recommendations and overall dietary patterns rather than individual nutrients. In contrast, the final DGA retain a relatively nutrient-centered framing, even though the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC) evaluated evidence through a life-course and dietary pattern lens. The Scientific Foundation report is largely organized according to nutrients, and several of the eight final recommenda-

tions, while presented in food-group terms, still prioritize meeting specific nutrient targets. The burden of translating nutrient quantities to daily food choices is therefore placed on consumers. It might also encourage product reformulation aimed at achieving numerical thresholds without necessarily improving overall diet quality. More explicit integration of nutrient goals within practical dietary pattern examples may further strengthen future editions.

The recommendation on protein foods illustrates this issue. National data indicate that protein intake is generally adequate for much of the U.S. population, although adolescent girls and older adult women are more likely to fall below estimated requirements.¹ In this context, the quality of that protein and where it comes from are important. American diets remain dominated by animal-source proteins, whereas consumption of plant-based protein foods is consistently low.² The DGAC explicitly emphasized increasing plant-based protein options, recommending "replacing red and processed meats with beans, peas, and lentils", yet this emphasis is less apparent in the final recommendations. In contrast, the final DGA present protein foods largely as a category requiring reinforcement, encouraging Americans to "consume a variety of protein foods from animal sources as well as from plant sources" and to prioritize "high-quality, nutrient-dense" options, without clearly defining protein adequacy, quality, or preferred sources. Clearer guidance that encourages healthier protein sources may help avoid an emphasis on protein quantity alone and better align recommendations with broader evidence on

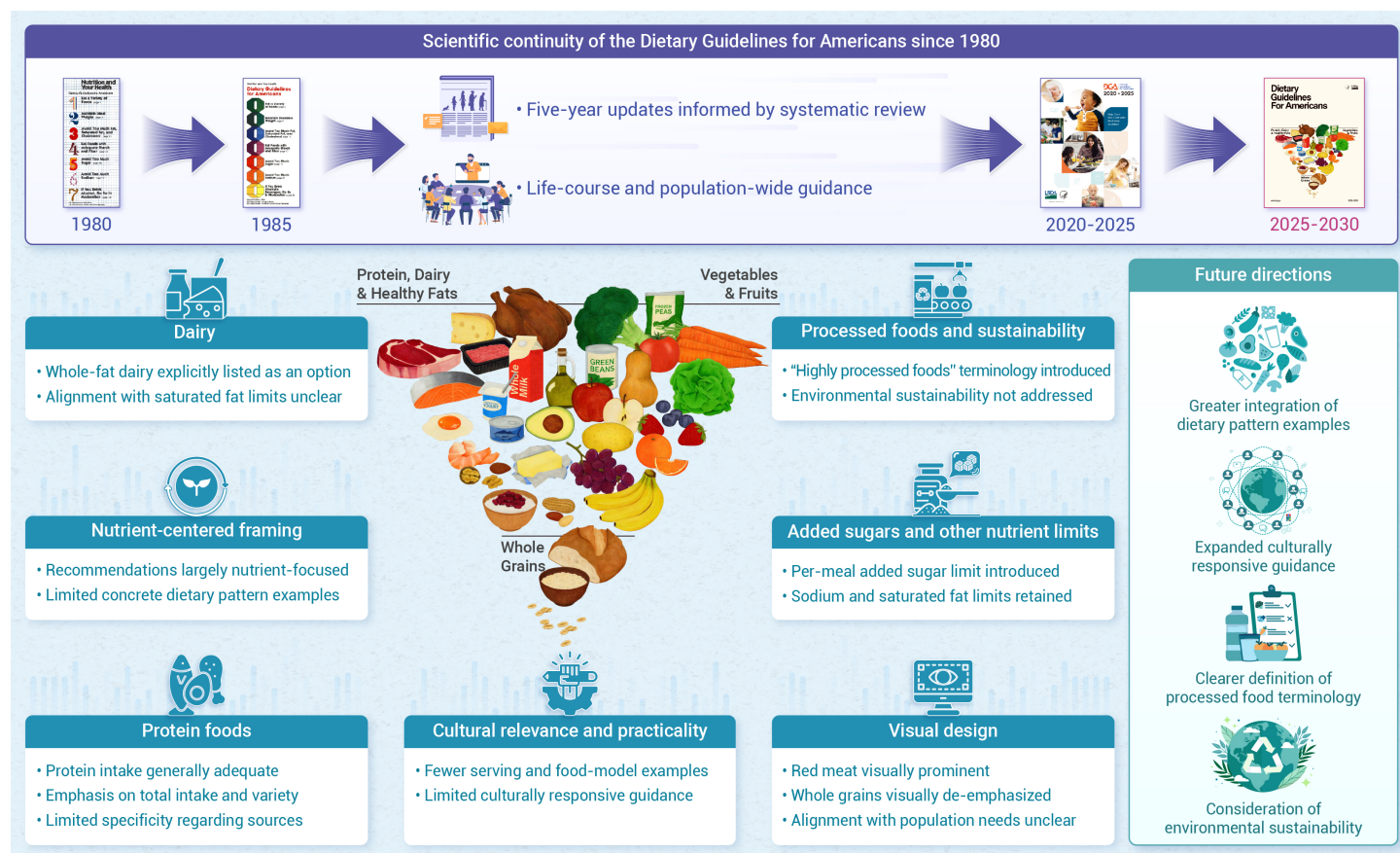


Figure 1. Overview of the key features of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2025–2030. Source: Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee. *Scientific Report of the 2025 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture; *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2025–2030*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture.

cardiometabolic health.

A similar concern appears in the dairy recommendations. The DGA are more accepting of whole-fat dairy than previous editions and now explicitly list full-fat products as an option. However, the rationale provided in the Scientific Foundation report is not entirely convincing. Evidence cited in support of whole-fat dairy includes recent pilot trials and observational studies (often focused on intermediate biomarkers) reporting neutral associations with cardiometabolic outcomes. Because whole-fat dairy is a major source of dietary saturated fat, the DGAC systematic review included it as a food source of saturated fat and graded evidence supporting neutral associations as limited.³ The broader body of evidence continues to support limiting saturated fat intake at the population level. The Scientific Foundation report also suggests that low-fat dairy products may be less desirable because they often contain added ingredients; however, similar additives may also be present in whole-fat products. Taken together, the current evidence provides limited justification for favoring whole-fat over low-fat dairy options. Emphasizing minimally processed dairy options while reiterating the importance of overall limits on saturated fat may provide more consistent guidance.

The most specific quantitative guidance in the new DGA relates to added sugar. Maintaining an upper limit is consistent with evidence linking added sugar intake to cardiometabolic risk. The new recommendation of "no more than 10 grams per meal" may, for individuals consuming three meals per day, translate into a lower daily intake than earlier DGA editions or the WHO recommendations, which are framed as a daily percentage threshold (i.e., no more than 10% of total energy intake). Yet, the guidance could be made more consumer-friendly. Concrete examples or tools would help individuals interpret these numerical targets, particularly given the high prevalence of snack and between-meal intake in the U.S., where added sugars consumed outside main meals may not be fully addressed by a per-meal limit. The recommendations on saturated fat and sodium remain consistent with previous editions, reinforcing continuity in core public health messages. However, the guidelines' emphasis on meats and the suggestion to season them with salt may benefit from further clarification to avoid confusion when considered alongside the overall limits for these nutrients.

Beyond the emphasis on nutrients, feasibility and cultural relevance also warrant closer attention. In the new guidelines, many quantitative serving recommendations and dietary pattern examples from previous editions are removed from the main text and condensed into a brief 2-page appendix. Although the document is substantially shortened, it may be less practical for some populations. The absence of clear examples, serving ranges, or culturally relevant models can make the recommendations more difficult to translate into daily food choices, particularly for children and older adults, who may require more tailored support. Notably, the DGAC addressed these issues in a dedicated chapter on culturally responsive approaches to improving diet, an emphasis that is less apparent in the final DGA.

Several countries value practical information and use culturally grounded dietary icons and education tools. China's Food Pagoda, Japan's Spinning Top, and Australia's Healthy Eating Plate are designed to reflect local culinary traditions and typical eating patterns. By comparison, the DGA's inverted pyramid may be less intuitive, particularly in how grain foods (such as whole grains) are visually de-emphasized, while red meat appears more prominent near the top of the widening triangle. This design may not optimally align with national data, which show that Americans eat too few whole grains and too much red meat.⁴⁻⁵ Future revisions of visual tools could more clearly emphasize recommended food groups and better align the design with population dietary needs.

The new edition also addresses processed foods. The DGAC acknowledged possible health impacts associated with ultra-processed foods but refrained from drawing strong conclusions, partly because of ongoing debate regarding their definition and classification. Both the Scientific Foundation report and the final recommendations avoid the term "ultra-processed" and

instead introduce the concept of "highly processed foods", a choice that may reflect efforts to balance scientific precision with the practical challenges of policy implementation. However, the new term remains insufficiently defined and may limit comparability with existing research. While not all processed foods are harmful, many ultra-processed products are consistently associated with suboptimal diet quality. A clearer definition and distinction from "ultra-processed foods" would improve public understanding in an increasingly complex food environment.

Perhaps the most notable omission in the 2025–2030 DGA is the limited recognition of environmental sustainability. Although sustainability was excluded from the DGAC's formal scope, the absence of even a brief discussion in the final guidelines contrasts with dietary guidelines in several other countries that increasingly integrate environmental considerations. Dietary patterns with a greater emphasis on plant-based foods may confer both health and environmental benefits. The lack of sustainability considerations may limit the relevance of dietary guidance in the context of evolving food-system challenges, including climate changes. From this perspective, the visual prominence of red meat in the inverted food pyramid may warrant reconsideration.

In conclusion, the 2025–2030 DGA largely preserve the scientific continuity and core values that have long guided nutrition advice in the United States, including emphasizing fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, as well as limiting added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium. At the same time, the new edition appears more limited in scope than guidelines from many other countries, particularly in its return to a nutrient-centered framing, reduced provision of practical tools, and lack of sustainability considerations. As dietary guidelines increasingly function not only as health policy but also as frameworks that intersect with cultural and environmental concerns, future editions could be strengthened by integrating these dimensions more explicitly.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Xiang Gao is an Editorial Board member of The Innovation Nutrition and was blinded from reviewing or making final decisions on the manuscript. Peer review was handled independently of this member and their research group. The other authors declare no conflicts of interest.