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The new food pyramid, explained

Jan. 22, 2026
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The new edition of the "Dietary Guidelines for Americans" is out, complete with a new take on an old graphic. Here's what that means for you.



The New Food Pyramid from the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2025-2030.

HHS and USDA

If you've been keeping up with nutrition advice lately, you may have heard that there's a new food pyramid in town.

On [January 7, 2026](#), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) released an updated version of the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#). The 10-page document was accompanied by a new take on an old graphic – one that's generated a fair amount of media coverage and a lot of strong opinions.

But what does it mean for how we should be eating? Two nutrition experts from the [School of Nutritional Sciences and Wellness](#) help break it down for us.

What are the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*?

Every five years, the USDA and HHS publish the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, a document that provides advice on what to eat and drink to promote health and prevent diet-related disease. **First published in 1980**, the documents are intended to guide policymakers, federal nutrition program operators, healthcare providers and nutrition educators as they craft nutrition policy, advise patients and teach students about how to eat for optimal health.

The *Dietary Guidelines* are updated periodically to reflect advances in nutrition science and to respond to current trends and emerging concerns in public health. Their recommendations are supported by extensive scientific reports compiled over the course of several years by a committee of nutrition and health experts.

What do the new guidelines say?

The tenth edition of the *Dietary Guidelines* leads with this message: Eat real food.

"They use the term 'real food' in opposition to processed or ultra-processed foods," said [Vanessa da Silva](#), who directs the [Diabetes Prevention Program](#) for University of Arizona Cooperative Extension. "What they're saying is that for the health of Americans, we should all be eating foods that are in their whole, intact state – or as close to that as possible."

The document recommends that Americans prioritize protein at every meal, eat fruits and vegetables throughout the day, incorporate healthy fats, focus on whole grains and minimize highly processed foods, refined carbohydrates and added sugars.

| Food group | Serving goals (based on a 2,000 kcal / day diet) |
|--------------|--|
| Protein | 1.2 - 1.6 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight per day, adjusting as needed based on individual caloric requirements |
| Dairy | 3 servings per day, adjusting as needed based on individual caloric requirements |
| Vegetables | 3 servings per day, adjusting as needed based on individual caloric requirements |
| Fruits | 2 servings per day, adjusting as needed based on individual caloric requirements |
| Whole grains | 2 - 4 servings per day, adjusting as needed based on individual caloric requirements |

Source: *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, 2025-2030

The guidelines encourage people to incorporate a variety of foods from each group into their diets, reduce alcohol consumption and limit saturated fat and sodium intake.

What has changed from previous guidelines?

Despite the changes to the visual guide that accompanies the *Dietary Guidelines* (more on that later), much of the advice in the new edition is consistent with that of previous issues, said [Ashley Carrillo](#), an assistant professor of practice for the School of Nutritional Sciences and Wellness and longtime nutrition educator.

"Previous iterations of the guidelines also prioritized protein and encouraged eating fruits and vegetables and choosing fiber-rich whole grains," she said. "A lot of what's changed is the emphasis on where those nutrients are coming from."

One example of this is the new recommendations around protein.

"Protein recommendations have increased from 0.8 grams per kilogram of body weight to 1.2 to 1.6 grams per kilogram of body weight," da Silva said. "The new guidelines emphasize animal-derived protein sources, where previous versions have encouraged a more plant-forward approach."



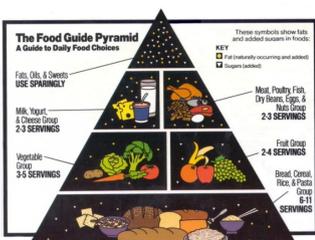
Other differences include an emphasis on full-fat dairy (as opposed to previous guidance that steered Americans toward low- and no-fat dairy options) and a recommendation of no added sugars for children under the age of 10.

These changes have led to concerns among some nutrition professionals that the new guidelines may be challenging for many to put into practice.

"Let's look at saturated fat, for example," said da Silva. "They've maintained the longstanding cap on recommended intake of saturated fat at no more than 10% of daily calories. If you're consuming a lot of full-fat dairy – which has more saturated fat than the low-fat version – there's a lot of potential to go over that 10% cap, especially if you're also getting a lot of your protein from animal sources."

The restriction on added sugar for children also has some dietitians and nutrition educators concerned.

"Beyond the question of whether it's realistic to restrict kids from all sources of added sugar, there's reason to be concerned about what this might do to kids' relationships with food in the long run," Carrillo said. "We know that restriction can contribute to disordered eating behaviors like hiding food, bingeing behavior and just general anxiety around those restricted foods. It also seems to disregard that we don't just eat for nourishment – that food can also be a source of joy and connection."



The Food Guide Pyramid icon (left) was used 1992-2005. The MyPlate icon (center) was used 2011-2025. The New Food Pyramid was released in January 2026.

HHS and USDA

From pyramid, to plate, to pyramid

When the USDA and HHS released their updated guidelines, they also released the New Food Pyramid, a visual icon meant to help a general audience understand their dietary recommendations.

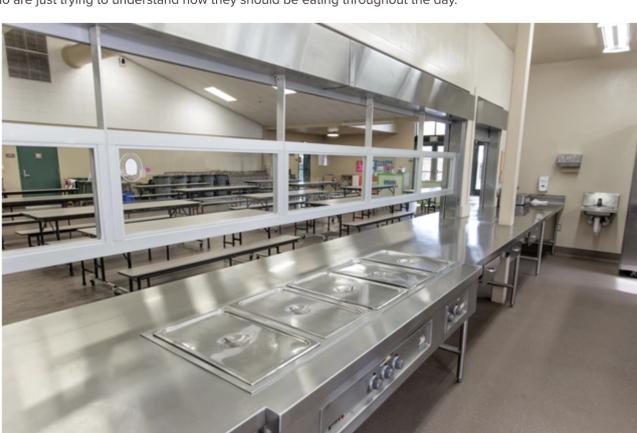
Many Americans (hello, fellow Millennials!) probably remember learning about the food pyramid in school. The Food Guide Pyramid, released in 1992, was a nutrition education tool developed over more than a decade. The pyramid shape served as a visual representation of how to eat healthy until 2011 (it was revised to the MyPyramid icon in 2005).

The pyramid was replaced by MyPlate, which was the *Dietary Guidelines*'s visual icon from 2011 through 2025. The shift in icon was meant to address some of the challenges posed by a more abstract visual.

"USDA changed from the first pyramid to the MyPlate graphic because they found that the plate was better as an educational tool," da Silva said. "In my experience working as a nutrition educator, it really helped people to visualize filling half their plate with fruits and vegetables, and a quarter with protein, and so on."

The New Food Pyramid upends the 1992 original (literally – the pyramid is now inverted). Protein and veggies have moved from their former positions somewhere toward the middle of the pyramid to its base. Whole grains – once at the base – have been moved to the smallest point. That shift has caused some to worry about the potential for mixed messages.

"When you look at the new pyramid, whole grains appear in a very small section just at the bottom, which seems to suggest that they're being de-emphasized," Carrillo pointed out. "There's a potential disconnect between the image and the actual guidelines, which recommend 2-4 daily servings of grains. That might be confusing for folks who are just trying to understand how they should be eating throughout the day."



Who's affected by the *Dietary Guidelines*?

More people than you might think.

"The 400-page [scientific report](#) that accompanies these guidelines is going to inform policy decisions for the next five years," Carrillo said. "That's going to affect things like school lunches, federally funded healthcare facilities and prisons. For a lot of people in those institutions, the food they get there is the bulk – if not the entirety – of their nutrition for the day."

da Silva pointed out that in order to follow the new guidelines, many institutions would have to make some significant changes – and that would require the support of policymakers.

"If we have to prepare more foods from scratch, per the new guidelines, institutions will need more capacity," she said. "They'll need more storage and refrigeration, they'll need more food, they'll need trained staff to prepare these foods. All of that would require funding, and that's where I would hope to see policy changes to allow for that."

But what if you're not part of any of those institutions? Do the guidelines matter for you?

"Americans have not been meeting the dietary guidelines – ever," said da Silva. "So what do they really mean in practice? To really improve health at a population level, the guidelines need to be accompanied by policies that improve access and education and meet people where they are. That's what I'll be watching for."



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