

Preserving the Science in Our Dietary Guidelines

By Sarah Reinhardt



Nearly 60 percent of all adults in the United States suffer from one or more chronic diseases, including cancer, cardiovascular disease, and type 2 diabetes, the leading causes of death and

disability nationwide. These diseases not only shorten lives, but also are extremely expensive to treat. Along with mental health conditions, they account for 90 percent of the nation's \$3.5 trillion in annual health care expenditures.

Research shows that many of these diseases are caused at least in part by poor diet. Most people fall far short of consuming the daily recommended amounts of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. They also eat too much sugar, refined grains, sodium, and processed meats.

Fortunately, we have proven, effective tools to help combat diet-related disease. Chief among these is the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, a comprehensive set of federal nutrition recommendations developed every five years by a panel of scientific experts. The guidelines are intended to inform federal programs that serve millions of children, parents, seniors, veterans, and other members of the general public each day. However, the United States has not done enough to implement the guidelines, so they do not have the impact they should on people's diets.

The new Union of Concerned Scientists report *Delivering on the Dietary Guidelines* shows that if the US government had supported actionable, science-based guidelines that called



Members of the military are just some of the millions of people nationwide who benefit from the science-based recommendations in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

for limiting consumption of processed meats and added sugar—and if Americans were able to follow them—we could have saved nearly 23,000 lives and reduced medical costs by \$18 billion in 2018 alone. Furthermore, if Americans had followed the guidelines' fruit and vegetable recommendations, an additional 110,000 lives and \$32 billion could have been saved.

With the process to develop the *2020–2025 Dietary Guidelines* now under way, the Trump administration's industry-friendly bias and anti-science agenda threatens to make it even more difficult to realize the guidelines' potential. The final guidelines are expected to be released by the end of 2020, and UCS is working to ensure that science remains at the center of the process.

We're calling on the administration to resist food industry pressure and publish guidelines that prioritize public health, and to address systemic barriers to healthier diets. Among other things, this can be done by maintaining school nutrition standards that reflect the guidelines' recommendations, supporting programs that provide incentives for low-income shoppers to purchase local fruits and vegetables, and promoting policies that help make the healthy choice the easy choice. {C}

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