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NUTRI-NEWS Q&A

Nutrition guidelines reworked

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Last month, the American Heart Association published its 2006 diet and lifestyle recommendations.

These replace association dietary guidelines released in 2000. You can find more information by going to the heart association Web site and following the link that says New Dietary Recommendations.

Meanwhile, here are some answers to a few commonly asked questions.

Q: How are the new recommendations different from the earlier ones?

A: Like the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute's Therapeutic Lifestyle Change cholesterol-lowering program, the new heart association recommendations address total lifestyle, not just diet. In view of the obesity epidemic, the importance of maintaining a healthy body weight is central.

The new guidelines also parallel other dietary guidelines by recognizing that people of different ages, body sizes and activity levels require different calorie levels.

The 2000 recommendations specified five or more servings of fruits and vegetables a day, six or more servings of grains and so on. Those specific guidelines are gone in 2006. They've been replaced by a recommendation that energy intake be balanced with calories burned to maintain a healthy weight. But the association still recommends:

Eating fish at least twice a week.

Consuming a diet rich in vegetables and fruits.

Choosing whole grain, high-fiber foods.

The committee also suggests minimizing intake of beverages and foods with added sugars because of their calorie density and choosing and preparing foods with little or no salt.

Lifestyle goals include being physically active and avoiding exposure to tobacco products.

The association committee has continued to move toward emphasizing adoption of an overall healthful diet over meeting specific nutrient targets. Dietitians, physicians and researchers can debate whether saturated fat should be at 7 percent or 10 percent of calories. The general public needs those recommendations translated into food choices at the table. That said, the new guidelines further reduce suggested saturated fat intake from 10 percent to 7 percent of calories and trans fats to less than 1 percent of calories.

Q: Does this mean that trans fatty acids are worse for you than saturated fats?

A: Saturated fats raise LDL-cholesterol (so-called "bad" cholesterol) more than trans fatty acids.

But trans fatty acids also lower HDL-cholesterol ("good" cholesterol). The difference in

recommendations, though, is related more to the fact that Americans eat much more saturated fat than trans fat. (See table.) Trans fat intake has been falling and should fall more now that food labels are required to reveal the trans fat content.

Q: What else is new for 2006?

A: The heart association now includes a recommendation that the guidelines be followed when eating food prepared outside the home. This reflects the association's recognition that we are eating out more and more and that environmental factors drive diet and lifestyle.

Here's an example: On average, Americans eat 4,000 to 5,000 milligrams of sodium a day, and that number is probably on the rise. The association has long recommended that Americans limit sodium intake to fewer than 2,300 milligrams a day.

That's pretty difficult, when one slice of Pizza Hut Meat Lovers' thin-crust pizza has more than 1,000 milligrams. (The Veggie Lovers' has about half that, but it still adds up.) A Bob Evans Country Biscuit Breakfast delivers all 2,300 milligrams at the break of day. (Tip: The fruit and yogurt plate has only 109 milligrams.)

The 6-inch Subway club sandwich has fewer than 6 grams of fat, but more than 1,300 milligrams of sodium. (Tip: The roast beef deli sandwich has only 4.5 grams of fat and 660 milligrams of sodium.)

I'm not picking on these folks. They are forthright enough to post their nutrition information, and the numbers aren't unusual.

The new association guidelines include a call for restaurants, the food industry and schools to support their clientele in making changes. Restaurants are urged to display calorie content prominently on their menus and to cut back on calories, sodium and saturated and trans fats by rethinking recipes, reducing portion sizes and/or providing options for smaller portions, featuring whole grains and presenting vegetables and fruits in creative ways.

I hope that forward-thinking restaurants and food-industry leaders will do just that.

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