

# A Suggestion on Food Guides and Dietary Guidelines

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Recently, various government and professional groups have offered guidelines about dietary intake (1-5) to the public, for whom the resultant conflicting advice undoubtedly is confusing. More crucial may be the degree to which full implementation of any set of guidelines would require substantial shifts in dietary practices. While the U.S. Dietary Goals (1) would require significant dietary changes for the U.S. population (6), the USDA/HHS Dietary Guidelines suggest less challenging dietary modifications. The recommendations offered by the Food and Nutrition Board (FNB) essentially agree with the Dietary Guidelines, except that the FNB avoided specific recommendations relevant to dietary cholesterol or to the polyunsaturated to saturated fat ratio (3). The USDA/HHS and FNB guidelines both recommend the consumption of a variety of foods. In promoting this behavior, the American Medical Association (4) suggests the continued utilization of the Four Food Groups (5), first published by USDA in 1957, as a guideline for daily consumption of a variety of foods.

In contrast to the other guidelines, the Four Food Groups presents dietary guidance in terms of foods rather than in terms of nutrients or food components, e.g., fat, fiber, sucrose. But despite the fact that the Four Food Groups plan recommends 4 servings per day each from the fruits and vegetables group and the cereal grain products group and only 2 servings per day each from the milk products group and from the protein-rich foods group, graphic representations of the Four Food Groups rarely emphasize the number of servings recommended. Figure 1 displays a graphic representation of the Four Food Groups with and without emphasis on the relative number of servings. Adoption of the graphic that includes emphasis on the number of servings would assist understanding of the initial intent of the Four Food Groups. It is suitable for use on food labels as well. The graphic representation of the concepts of eating these relative proportions of foods and of eating a variety of foods also could apply to *each meal*.

The illustration uses the term "cereal grain products" because the term *starch* erroneously implies that these foods provide only energy from carbohydrate and obscures the other nutrients contributed by these foods. The graphic does not include a fifth food group of high-energy, low-nutrient foods that a USDA publication recently has suggested (5). The foods in this fifth group are refined, partitioned, food ingredients (7), such as vegetable oils, syrups, and sugars. These foods are not major sources of nutrients; and therefore, this fifth group has little utility as part of a nutrition education tool designed primarily to provide guidance for selection of an adequate diet from high nutrient-density foods.

A graphic representation of the Four Food Groups that emphasizes fruits, vegetables, and grains is consistent with guidelines that recommend increased consumption of nondigestible carbohydrate and decreased consumption of fat. It emphasizes foods that are good sources of many vitamins and minerals.

The Four Food Groups concept is familiar to the public and has broad acceptance, without serious reservations, by nutritionists. Food is what is eaten by people; therefore, people are much more likely to understand a food guide than they are to understand guidelines in terms of

ingredients, composition, nutritive value, or presence or absence of nonnutritive factors. This simple, familiar food guide can accommodate more specific dietary goals as scientific facts and evidence permit. □

## LITERATURE CITED

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Figure 1 Alternative representations of the Four Food Groups

