

Dietary guidelines around the world

Most people nowadays are aware that they need to eat a variety of foods, moderate their fat intake and exercise more. Messages on healthy lifestyles have found their way into school programs, newspapers, magazines and even the workplace.

Dietary guidelines are one of the main ways in which governments have tried to promote healthy lifestyles to reduce the risk of chronic diseases, such as coronary heart disease and certain cancers. The guidelines are suggestions for people to follow based on nutritional needs, food supplies, eating habits and cultural beliefs.

Dietary practices throughout the world vary greatly as a result of cultural, environmental, political, socioeconomic and behavioral practices. Yet despite this, dietary guidelines have surprising similarities from Japan to Scandinavia to the U.S. Whether a country has five guidelines or fifteen, there are similar basic recommendations that are shared throughout the world:

- ***Eat a variety of foods***

Overwhelmingly, this is the first and most consistent message across dietary guidelines worldwide. This guideline is intended to ensure that people obtain an optimal mix of vitamins and minerals in their daily food intake. Variety also helps to reduce the risk of coronary heart disease. Japanese guidelines specifically recommend eating at least 30 different foods every day!

- ***Moderate fat intake***

With the spread of chronic diseases such as heart disease and diabetes, fat, saturated fat and cholesterol are crucial factors in dietary guidelines. Recommended fat intake varies from country to country. While Korea recommends fat consumption of 20 percent of energy (calorie) intake, the Netherlands recommends a higher level of 35 percent of energy. In countries that experience both under- and over-nutrition, guidelines are worded to ensure an adequate calorie intake for the entire population. In Vietnam, for example, one of the guidelines is to "Consume a certain amount of fat".

- ***Achieving and maintaining a healthy body weight***

Many countries recognise the importance of a healthy body weight in helping to prevent diet-related disease. This is usually worded to reflect the balance of "energy in" (food intake) versus "energy out" (physical activity). The United Kingdom, for example, focuses on weight control - "Eat the right amount to be a healthy weight" - while in Indonesia the guideline recommends "Consume foods to provide sufficient energy".

- ***Moderate salt intake***

Most guidelines advocate a moderate salt intake although recommended levels are not generally quantified. In countries that do give guidelines on the amount, the level varies from 5g/day in Singapore to 10g/day in Japan.

- ***Moderate alcohol consumption***

Moderation of alcohol intake can be found in the dietary guidelines in most countries. Messages range from "If you drink, keep within sensible limits" in the United Kingdom to "Alcohol is forbidden for children and pregnant women" in Hungary.

- ***Nutrient-specific recommendations***

In countries where deficiencies of vitamins and minerals have been identified as a public health issue, guidelines reflect this. In Australia, women and girls are urged to "Eat more calcium-containing foods" while Indonesians are advised to "Consume iron-rich foods". The Philippines recommends to "Choose foods fortified with nutrients".

- ***Moderate sugar intake***

In some countries, moderation in sugar intake is recommended. The Vietnamese guideline is "Consume a small amount of sugar". In other countries, including Canada, Korea, Japan, China and the Philippines, sugars are not mentioned at all.

Dietary guidance throughout the world must take into account local public health problems, cultural traditions, eating habits and the available food supply. However, when it comes to lifestyle and eating behaviors to maximize health, it is truly a small world after all.