

New diet guide: Count calories and exercise

Government sees chance to change health habits

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- Cave men lived a healthy lifestyle: Their calorie intake stayed low because food was hard to find, and they exercised regularly to bring home the bacon.

The government wants Americans to follow that approach. Today, however, food is at their fingertips, driving has replaced running and people are fatter than ever.

New dietary guidelines coming out Wednesday are expected to place more emphasis on counting calories and exercising daily, along with swapping whole grains for refined ones and eating a lot more vegetables and fruits.

The advice is not really new. But Americans don't heed it, so the government sees the guidelines as an opportunity to change people's ways.

The recommendations will be incorporated into the familiar Food Guide Pyramid, which most Americans know about but which few actually follow. The Agriculture Department is revising the pyramid for the first time since 1992, when it was developed.

"It has been a big problem in the past that basically, the federal government has published a booklet and then crossed their fingers and hoped that Americans ate better," said Margo Wootan, nutrition policy director for the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a health advocacy group.

"That's clearly not been enough. What we need is significant investment in programs and changes in policy and the food environment that help Americans to eat better and watch their weight," Wootan said.

The guidelines being issued by the Agriculture and Health and Human Services departments were expected to reflect the recommendations of a 13-member panel of scientists and doctors who spent nearly a year reviewing Americans' diet and health.

The committee said people lead sedentary lifestyles and choose their food poorly, leading many to exceed the calories they need even as they fail to get enough nutrition.

Controlling calories -- not limiting carbohydrates, as some popular diets recommend -- is key to controlling weight, the panel said.

Also key is daily exercise. The panel recommended a minimum of at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise -- brisk walking or gardening -- on most days.

But it said many adults need to exercise for 60 minutes or more to prevent weight gain, and people who have lost weight may need to exercise for 60 to 90 minutes to keep it off.

The panel said to choose fats and carbohydrates wisely. That means severely restricting trans fat that can clog arteries and eating fiber-rich whole fruits and whole grain breads versus juice and refined grains. It said people need at least three one-ounce servings of whole grains each day.

People should eat five to 13 servings each day of fruits and vegetables, depending on their age and level of activity, the panel said.

The committee recommended cups rather than serving sizes in many instances; by this measure, the average person would need 4 1/2 cups of fruits and veggies to maintain his or her weight.

That might sound like a lot, but it's easy to do, said Robert Earl, senior director for nutrition policy for the National Food Processors Association.

"Let's say you drink a serving of orange juice, you eat a banana, you have a salad with one of your meals, and at dinner, you have a vegetable," Earl said. "I'll bet you're at close to 4 cups already, if not more. The important thing is to move consumers in the right direction."

The panel also said people need to reduce the amount of salt they eat to about one level teaspoon each day -- salt is linked to high blood pressure -- and they should drink alcohol in moderation, about one drink each day for women and two for men.