

2020-2025

U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans

Courtney Luecking, Janet Mullins, Jackie Walters, and Lucy Valdez, Dietetics and Human Nutrition

Every five years, the law requires the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to review the latest science and update advice on what Americans should eat and drink. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans are designed to provide current dietary advice to promote health, reduce risk of chronic disease, and meet nutritional needs across the lifespan. The guidelines also serve as a foundation for federal food, nutrition, and health policies and programs like the National School Lunch Program and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which aim to reduce hunger and increase food security through access to healthy, affordable food.

Development of the Guidelines

In 1980, acting on a congressional mandate, the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services issued the first set of dietary guidelines for Americans. The guidelines are updated every five years. The intent is to provide current nutrition information to support informed choices about food. Over the decades, these guidelines have led to significant changes in American eating behaviors. It is not easy to change the consumption patterns of a nation as large and diverse as the United States.

From the formation of a committee of experts through the release of the updated guidelines, the process depends on the work of many dedicated scientists and federal professionals. The steps they take include:

1. Review the evidence. (What is known based on peer-reviewed science?)
2. Draw conclusions. (How strong is the evidence, and what is the bottom line?)
3. Translate conclusions into advice. (What do people need to know?)
4. Create dietary guidance. (What eating behaviors promote health and well-being?)



Terms to know

Dietary pattern: the combination of foods and beverages eaten over time

Empty calories: foods that supply concentrated calories but few nutrients

Nutrient-dense foods: foods rich in nutrients, but relatively low in calories

The Dietary Guidelines for 2020-2025

The 2020-2025 update contains four guidelines, some of which mirror previous versions.

- 1. Follow a healthy dietary pattern at every life stage.** It is never too late, or too early, to make small or large changes to eat more healthfully. Rather than focusing on any single food, drink, or nutrient, such as fat or a vitamin, aim to eat a variety of foods from all food groups. A dietary pattern is the combination of foods and beverages consumed over time.

2. Customize and enjoy nutrient-dense food and beverage choices to reflect personal preferences, cultural traditions, and budgetary considerations. The guidelines are a framework that can and should be personalized to individual needs; this includes cultural patterns, food budgets, and personal preferences. Nutrient-dense foods and drinks offer more nutrition bang for the calorie buck by providing vitamins, minerals, and other health-promoting components with little added sugars, saturated fat, or sodium.

3. Focus on meeting food group needs with nutrient-dense foods and beverages and stay within calorie limits. Most people can meet nutrition recommendations with the foods and beverages they choose to eat, rather than dietary supplements. A healthy dietary pattern comprises:

- vegetables in a rainbow of colors, including beans, peas, and lentils;
- fruits, especially whole fruit rather than juice;
- grains, particularly whole grains;
- dairy, including fat-free or low-fat cow's milk, yogurt, cheese, and/or fortified soy beverage and yogurt;
- protein foods, such as eggs, seafood, nuts, seeds, soy, beans, peas, lentils, lean meat, and poultry; and
- oils, including vegetable and cooking oils as well as those in seafood and nuts.

4. Limit foods and beverages higher in added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium, and limit alcohol. A healthy dietary pattern does not allow much room for added sugars, saturated fat, or sodium, which can add up quickly. If you do not drink alcohol, do not start. Adults of legal drinking age are advised to limit themselves to two or fewer drinks per day for men and one or less for women.

The 2020-2025 guidelines emphasize that the foods Americans currently choose to eat often lead to diabetes, heart disease, or other poor health conditions. The food environment in the United States makes it easy to eat too many calories. To make the new guidelines easier to use, dietary patterns were used to make recommendations.



Putting the Guidelines into Practice

Do you ever find yourself debating what to eat for breakfast, lunch, or dinner? Every day, we make decisions about the foods we eat. We want to make sure that every bite we take will nourish our bodies. Choosing an eating pattern rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains—while at the same time limiting added sugars, saturated fats, and excess sodium—can help reduce the risk of diet-related chronic diseases (USDA, 2020). When making food and beverage choices, a consistent, healthy eating pattern will affect your health in the long run.

Shop for a Healthy Dietary Pattern.

Don't be fooled by the myth that eating healthy is expensive. Knowing how to navigate your grocery store and read the pricing labels can help you choose food products that are right for you. But before you head to the store, preparing for your trip will help you make smarter shopping choices.

- Talk to household members about meals they would prefer for that day or week.
- Check what you have in your kitchen or pantry to avoid overstocking foods or beverages. (This can also help in brainstorming meal ideas).
- Make a grocery list to ensure you get everything you need and spend less time at the store.
- Eat before you go to the store. This will curb temptations to buy unnecessary foods or beverages.

Fruits and Vegetables

You can buy fruits and vegetables fresh from the produce section, frozen from the freezer section, or canned from the canned goods aisle.

- Buy fresh fruits and vegetables that are in season for the best and least expensive selection. Fresh produce is perfect for any dish, including salads. It is great for adding nice textures to meals or just eating alone as a snack, but only buy as much as can be eaten before spoilage to prevent food waste.
- If fruits or vegetables are not in season, buy frozen. Frozen fruits and vegetables are just as nutritious as their fresh counterparts and are typically cheaper. They also last a lot longer than fresh produce when stored in the freezer. Frozen vegetables are perfect for any hot dish, and frozen fruits are useful for smoothies.
- When buying canned goods, look for canned fruits packed in 100 percent fruit juice and canned vegetables that are low in sodium. Canned fruits and vegetables are equally nutritious to fresh produce, but typically less pricey. Canned vegetables are great in soups and stews, and canned fruits are great for baked goods or as a snack.

Grains

When walking through the bakery, bread, pasta, cereal, or snack aisle, opt for products that are made with whole grain.

- Look for “whole wheat” or “whole grain” on bread packaging labels.
- Use rice and pasta products as an inexpensive grain that can be added to a lot of dishes for extra nutrients. Aim for brown rice and whole-grain pastas.
- Aim to buy hot cereals like oatmeal and dry cereals that are made with whole grains. Avoid cereals with added sugars.

Protein Foods

Protein foods can be found in almost all parts of the grocery store, including the meat section, dairy section, frozen section, or canned/package goods aisles.

- Add plant-based protein foods to your meal plan as a great source of fiber that is often cheaper than animal-based alternatives. Canned beans, peas and lentils, nuts, seeds,

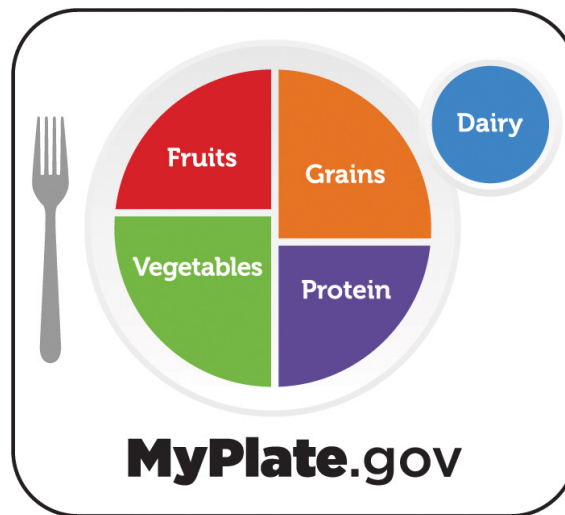


Figure 1. MyPlate food guide.

and nut butter are excellent sources of protein and are shelf stable.

- Eat eggs as a great source of protein. If you will not use a dozen eggs before the expiration date, check your grocery store for containers of six, or buy a small carton of liquid eggs.
- When buying meat, remember that leaner is better. Aim for meats that are at least 90 percent lean, like lean turkey, chicken, or ground beef. If you buy the family or value size, you can store the meat you do not use in the freezer to be consumed later.
- Buy canned fish like tuna or salmon as an inexpensive way to consume seafood. Canned seafood is also shelf stable. Avoid cans that are damaged or show signs of tampering.

Dairy

Shoppers can usually find all dairy products like milk, cheese, and yogurt in one section of the store.

- Check the sell-by date on all dairy products to get the freshest items.
- Opt for low-fat or nonfat dairy milks, which provide the same amount of nutrients as whole milk but with fewer calories. Soy milk is another great option if you choose not to consume dairy.
- Buy larger tubs of low-fat or fat-free yogurt instead of individual cups to get more for your buck. You can customize each serving by adding different kinds of fruit. This will also help you avoid added sugars that are usually in single-cup yogurts.
- Look for cheeses with reduced fat.

Additional Tips

- Buy generic or store-brand items, which are usually just as good as the commercial products, and often cheaper.
- Aim to buy only one or two junk food items every week for you and your family.
- Take advantage of coupons. Keep an eye out for products that are on sale.

Personalize Your Plate to Enjoy Every Bite.

Nutrients do not all come from specific foods or beverages. Nutrients come from the dietary pattern that people develop by consuming food and beverages in various combinations over time. If you look at the MyPlate image (Figure 1), you will notice that there are no specific foods or beverages added in each category. This is so that you can visualize what foods would fit into those categories that fit your personal preferences or cultural traditions.

- Do not let one ingredient keep you from eating a dish. If ordering at a restaurant, simply ask customer service to remove an ingredient you don't prefer or replace it with something else. The same goes for cooking a dish from a recipe. If you find a dish you want to make but it has an ingredient that you don't particularly like, swap it out with something you would enjoy more.
- Experiment with foods from different cultural cuisines. You may be surprised to find foods you like that you have never tried before.
- Take your favorite dish or favorite food and change it up once in a while. For example, if you love spaghetti and meatballs, try adding cooked broccoli or mixing in fresh spinach.

Choose Foods Packed with Nutrients — and within Calorie Limits.

Part of making every bite count is choosing foods that are full of nutrients. One of the easiest ways to do that is by choosing meals that are rich in vegetables. Most vegetables are naturally low in calories and high in fiber and nutrients. Including a variety of vegetables in the diet can help lower the risk of chronic diseases such as diabetes or heart disease (Boeing *et al*, 2012). Vegetables come in a variety of textures, tastes, and colors that can make your meals more exciting and



vibrant. A healthy diet features vegetables of various colors and textures, including:

- dark green, like kale, broccoli, spinach, romaine lettuce, bok choy, or collards;
- red and orange, like sweet potatoes, bell peppers, yellow squash, pumpkin, tomatoes, or carrots;
- protein-packed, like beans, peas, or lentils;
- starchy, like potatoes, lima beans, or plantains; and
- other vegetables, like onions, cucumbers, or cauliflower.

Steer Clear of Empty Calories and Sodium.

Empty calories describe foods that contribute calories but lack nutrients. This includes foods like donuts, sodas, or french fries. Moderation is key, so it is perfectly OK to consume these foods or beverages occasionally. The idea is not to have them show up consistently in your dietary pattern.

The Dietary Guidelines recommend that added sugars and saturated fats should be less than 15 percent of your daily calorie consumption (USDA, 2020). They also recommend that daily sodium consumption should be less than 2,300 mg per day. You can keep track of how much sodium is in food by looking at the nutrition facts label or looking for product labels with “low sodium” or “reduced sodium.”

Dietary Guidelines Around the World

Across the globe, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations assists member countries to develop, revise, and implement food-based dietary guidelines and food guides according to current scientific evidence. Dietary guidelines most often target health professionals and policymakers, while food guides are visual aids and materials developed to help consumers understand and apply the guidelines. More than 100 countries have developed dietary guidelines. Each country's guidelines reflect the nutrition status and culture of the population, as well as food availability.

Since 1961, the world population has increased the average number of calories consumed per day. The amount of calories consumed from sugar, fat, and meat has increased, while the amount of calories consumed from grain, produce, dairy products, and eggs has decreased. The dietary guidelines of most countries reflect these dangerous trends by recommending almost universally that people do three things:

- reduce calories from sugar, fat, saturated fat, trans fat, and sources of sodium;
- increase calories from whole grains, fruits, and vegetables; and
- balance calories eaten with physical activity.

The dietary guidelines of many countries also provide recommendations for infants and pregnant and lactating women, alcohol consumption, water consumption, and food safety. Some fascinating differences exist among countries' dietary guidelines as a result of culture, food availability, and nutrition status of their populations.

On the continent of Africa, Nigeria publishes guidelines in four different languages and provides different recommendations for different population groups. Kenya includes insects among the sources of complete protein to be eaten at least twice per week, with the remainder of high-quality protein coming from beans, peas, lentils, nuts, and edible seeds. The dietary guidelines of Benin urge people to drink no more than one alcoholic drink per day, stating, "Alcohol can be toxic even in small doses." Benin also guides its citizens to "preserve your traditional cuisine and teach it to your children in order for them to appreciate and protect their health and food culture. Traditional foods are generally better for your health than highly processed products." The food guide of Benin is shaped to resemble a traditional African house (Figure 2).

Some countries in Asia and the Pacific also provide different recommendations for specific population groups. Both China and the Philippines do so. One of the messages of China's dietary guidelines is to "eliminate waste and develop a new ethos of diet civilization." The dietary guidelines of the Philippines stress use of safe foods and water, iodized salt, management of stress, and avoidance of alcoholic beverages. Afghanistan shares concern about clean and safe water, and their dietary guidelines also urge people to eat fewer highly processed foods. China has released three food guides: the food guide pagoda, the Chinese food guide plate, and the Chinese food guide abacus (Figure 3).

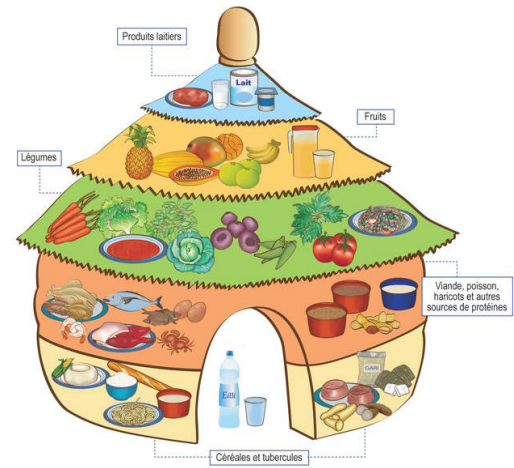


Figure 2. Food guide of Benin.

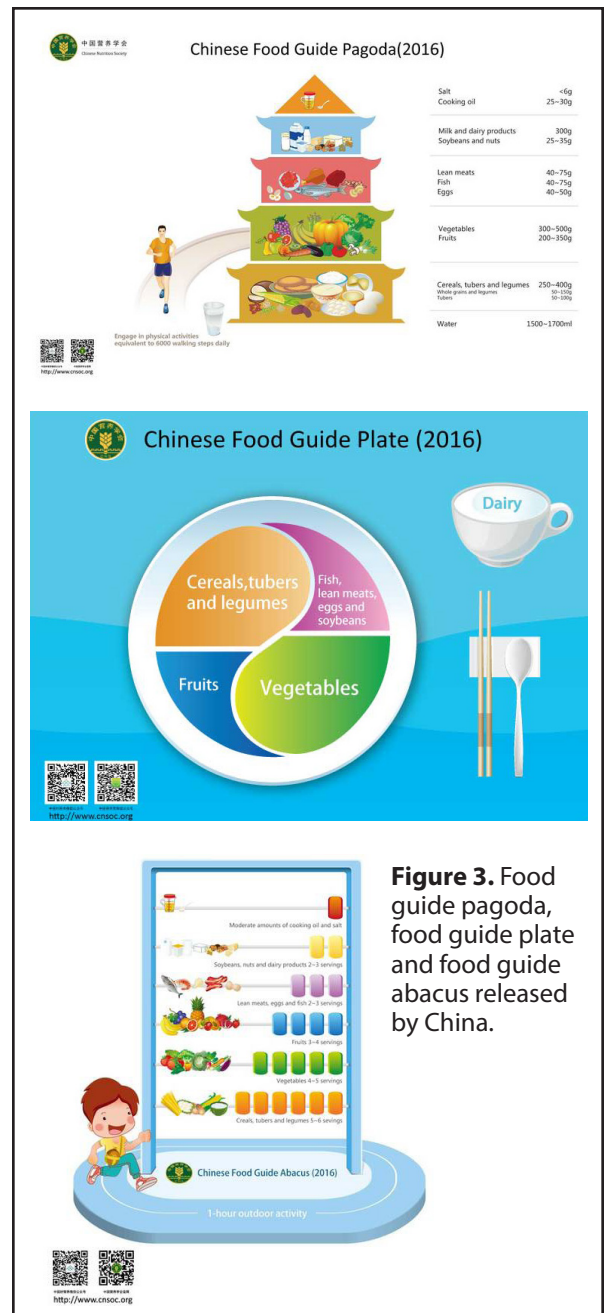


Figure 3. Food guide pagoda, food guide plate and food guide abacus released by China.

In the Middle East, the United Arab Emirates specify that the dietary guidelines shall be included in the school curriculum. Their food guide is represented by the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest skyscraper (Figure 4). Water is established as a food group and is represented by the color blue at the base of the Burj Khalifa. The dietary guidelines of Iran are very similar to those of the United States, and their food guide is a pyramid.

In Europe, the dietary guidelines of the United Kingdom (Figure 5) are very similar to those of the United States. The French dietary guidelines are also similar but allow a more liberal recommendation for consumption of alcohol, advising a limit of two glasses of wine for women and three for men. They suggest consuming mineral water rich in calcium. Additionally, they advise people to “prefer iodized salt,” “enjoy the benefits of sunlight in moderation,” and “reduce sedentary activities in children (T.V., video games).” The food guide of France provides 25 portraits for 25 different eating behaviors, such as “I struggle to make ends meet,” or “I do not cook.” The dietary guidelines of Bulgaria urge people to “take enough time to enjoy your food in a friendly environment” and specify a preference for consuming raw fruits and vegetables. The first message of Romania’s dietary guidelines is, “Enjoy the pleasure of eating.” Romania’s guidance also instructs people to “eat highly processed foods high in sugar sparingly.”

Brazil is the most populous country in Latin America, and its consumption of calories from various food groups is almost identical to that of the United States. The country does not issue a food guide. Their dietary guidelines provide 10 steps to healthy diets, emphasizing:

- natural or minimally processed foods as the basis of the diet;
- foods mainly of plant origin;
- culturally appropriate foods;
- socially and environmentally sustainable food systems;
- limited consumption of processed and ultra-processed foods;
- careful eating in appropriate environments and, whenever possible, in company;
- development and sharing of cooking skills;
- making “the preparation and eating of meals privileged times of conviviality and pleasure”; and
- being wary of food advertising and marketing, and teaching our children to be critical of it.

The first message of Cuba’s dietary guidelines states, “A variety of foods during the day is pleasant and necessary for good health.” They follow by advising to “Eat vegetables every day; fill yourself with life,” and “Eat fresh fruits, and your vitality will increase.” Cuba’s food guide depicts seven food plates in decreasing size, reflecting daily recommended amounts (Figure 6).

الدليل الإرشادي الوطني للتغذية



Figure 4. Food guide of the United Arab Emirates.

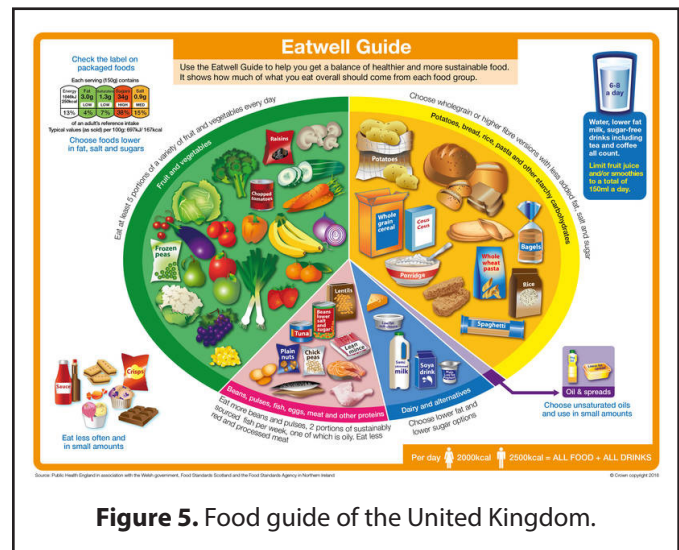


Figure 5. Food guide of the United Kingdom.

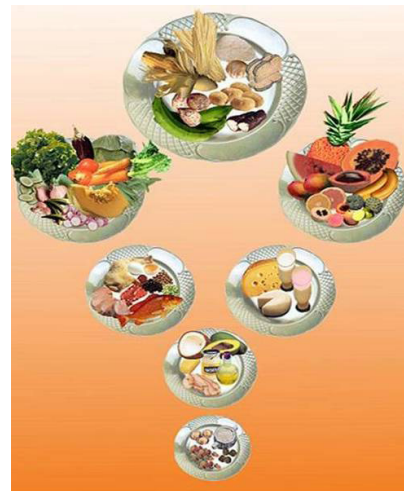


Figure 6. Food guide of Cuba.

The North American region consists of Canada and the United States, which are very similar in eating patterns and dietary guidelines. However, Canada's healthy eating recommendations also address mindful eating, cooking more often, enjoying food and the social aspect of eating meals, limiting highly processed foods, using food labels and the power of marketing to influence food choices (Figure 7). The dietary guidelines of the United States are limited to recommendations about the relative consumption of nutrients. As a nation in which 20 percent of meals are eaten in the car, and where 10 percent of disposable income is spent on fast food, the United States could learn something from countries that recognize the emotional, social, economic, and ecological importance of food.

Conclusion

Choosing foods to consume in your dietary pattern that are packed with nutrients could help you live a healthy life. There are plenty of good, tasty choices to fit into the way you want to eat. Choose wisely!

Resources

- Cox, J. (n.d.). *Shop healthy on a budget*. Retrieved March 01, 2021, from <https://www.eatright.org/food/planning-and-prep/smart-shopping/shop-healthy-on-a-budget>
- MyPlate (n.d.) *Grocery shopping*. Retrieved March 01, 2021, from <https://www.myplate.gov/tip-sheet/grocery-shopping>
- MyPlate. (n.d.) *Shop smart*. Retrieved March 01, 2021, from <https://www.myplate.gov/eat-healthy/healthy-eating-budget/shop-smart>
- USDA. (n.d.) *Seasonal produce guide*. Retrieved March 01, 2021, from <https://snaped.fns.usda.gov/seasonal-produce-guide>

Figure credits:

- 1: United States Department of Agriculture, myplate.gov.
- 2 through 7: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, www.fao.org.

Photos:

Copyright 2021, Getty Images

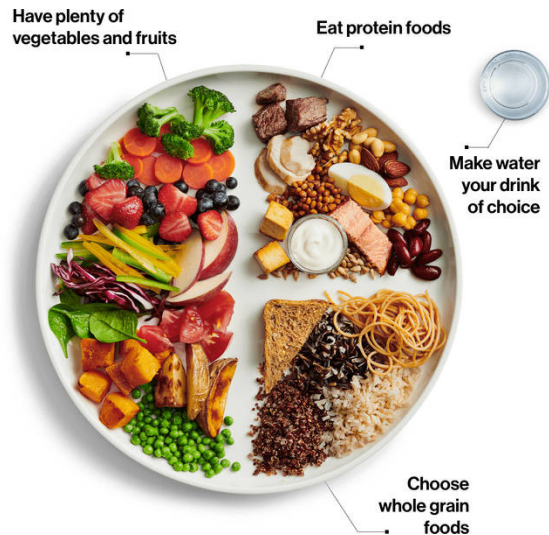


Figure 7. Food guide of Canada.

References

- Boeing, H., Bechthold, A., Bub, A., Ellinger, S., Haller, D., Kroke, A., Leschik-Bonnet, E., Muller, M., Oberritter, H., Schulze, M., Stehle, P., and Watzl, B. (2012). Critical Review: Vegetables and Fruit in the Prevention of Chronic Diseases. *European Journal of Nutrition*, 51(6), 637-663.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2020). *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/sites/default/files/2021-03/Dietary_Guidelines_for_Americans-2020-2025.pdf, retrieved January 29, 2021.
- Eleven Facts about American Eating Habits, *Do Something*, <https://www.dosomething.org/us/facts/11-facts-about-american-eating-habits>, downloaded March 2021.
- Food-based Dietary Guidelines, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, <http://www.fao.org/nutrition/education/food-dietary-guidelines>, downloaded March 2021.
- What the World Eats, National Geographic, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/what-the-world-eats/>, downloaded March 2021.
- History of the Dietary Guidelines, <https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/about-dietary-guidelines/history-dietary-guidelines>, accessed June 2021.