How Cancer Survivors Can Use the Dietary Guidelines

The 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines contain recommendations that cancer survivors that can incorporate into daily life.

February 1, 2021 By Angela Hummel

Make Every Bite Count. Many of the cancer survivors that I have counseled know this and it's why they choose to work with an oncology dietitian. To improve their eating habits, eat the right foods to help reduce side effects and symptoms and reduce the risk of recurrence.

The slogan for the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, Make Every Bite Count, demonstrates the importance of the whole diet. Are the foods you are choosing to eat benefiting your body? Are they full of nutrients and low in unnecessary calories? Or high in added sugars and fat and low in beneficial compounds like vitamins, minerals, fiber, water and phytochemicals? If you're trying to make healthier food choices, start by changing your mindset to, "I want to make every bite count."

What's New in the Dietary Guidelines?

Not much has changed from the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, but there are a few new additions. For the first time, the Dietary Guidelines include information for babies and toddlers.

Regarding specific food groups, there is more information regarding meat consumption in the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines. There are no specific guidelines about red meat consumption, however, whereas AICR recommends limiting consumption to 12-18 ounces or less cooked per week.

There is a recommendation about reducing intake of processed or high-fat meats. The Dietary Guidelines state, "Most intake of meats and poultry should be from fresh, frozen, or canned, and in lean forms (e.g., chicken breast or ground turkey) versus processed meats (e.g., hot dogs, sausages, ham, luncheon meats)." AICR's evidence-based recommendation takes a stronger stance and recommends avoiding processed meat or saving it only for special occasions.

How Can Survivors Use the New Dietary Guidelines?

The 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines have two primary focuses that cancer survivors that can incorporate into daily life.

1. “Customizing and enjoying nutrient-dense food and beverage choices to reflect personal preferences, cultural traditions, and budgetary considerations.”

Here’s how survivors can put this into practice:

- Customize. Many, but not all, survivors need to customize food intake based on side effects, symptoms or long-term impact from cancer and its treatment. Use AICR’s Healthy Recipes to find recipes for a variety of different cancer and treatment-related side effects. Customize recipes for your own personal taste. Use plant-based herbs and spices to satisfy treatment-impacted taste buds, add something new to recipe experiences and to modify lingering off-flavors from treatment.
- Enjoy. Find plant-based foods you enjoy and that you can consume with any lingering side effects. Use the AICR Foods that Fight CancerTM to explore colorful plant-based foods and find new favorites.
- Budget. – One of the main reasons people tend to not eat a healthy diet is because of the cost, but many plant-based meals can be made on a budget.

2. “Meeting food group needs with nutrient-dense foods and beverages, and stay within calorie limits.”

Here’s how survivors can put this into practice:

- Nutrient-dense choices. Meet nutritional needs primarily from nutrient-dense foods and beverages by choosing whole-plant foods and minimally-processed foods, instead of ultra-processed foods. Ultra-processed foods tend to be higher in added sugars and fats and have been stripped of important nutrients.
- Variety. Choose a variety of options from each food group – vegetables, fruits, whole grains, low-fat dairy and lean protein. Avoiding specific food groups will cause a lower intake of essential nutrients.
- Portion control. Pay attention to portion size as you build your meals and snacks. AICR’s New

American Plate model is a great portion control guide and can help you build a plant-based meal.

The Dietary Guidelines combined with AICR's resources can be used as guides to make healthy food choices at all stages of a cancer journey, but patients and survivors should always consult their doctor or health professional when making changes to their diet.

Which AICR Recommendations are Not in the Dietary Guidelines Yet?

Added Sugars

AICR recommends limiting consumption of added sugars often found in foods like desserts, sweetened snacks, candy, sugary breakfast cereals and bars because the extra empty calories can lead to weight gain and do not offer any health promoting nutrients. The new Dietary Guidelines note that at least 60% of American adults are consuming too many added sugars and that added sugars are a significant source of calories leading to weight gain, but the recommendation from 2015-2020 was not updated. The recommendation that added sugars should not exceed 10% or more of total calorie intake remains the same.

Sugar-Sweetened Beverages

AICR recommends avoiding sugar-sweetened beverages like soda, sweetened coffee and teas because of the significant source of calories. Instead of avoiding, the new Dietary Guidelines recommend only limiting sugar-sweetened beverages to small amounts or replacing with beverage options that contain no added sugars, such as water.

Alcohol

For cancer prevention, AICR recommends not drinking alcohol because there is convincing evidence that intake of less than one drink per day increases the risk of head and neck, esophageal and breast cancer. The new Dietary Guidelines have made the recommendation about alcohol consumption clearer by saying, "For those who choose to drink, intakes should be limited to 1 drink or less in a day for women and 2 drinks or less in a day for men, on days when alcohol is consumed." Even so, AICR was disappointed to see that the new guidelines did not incorporate the recommendation from the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee's Scientific Report that alcohol intake be limited to no more than one drink per day for men, on days when alcohol is consumed. You can read more about AICR's stance here.

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