

Guide to good eating

Consistent and scientifically sound messages on eating right should be given to the public.



Nutri Scene

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DIETARY guidelines have become an almost universally accepted tool in nutrition education, promoting appropriate dietary patterns. The first set of official food-based dietary guidelines for Malaysians was published in 1999. Ten years later, these guidelines were thoroughly reviewed and revised.

The new Malaysian Dietary Guidelines are expected to be launched on March 25, 2010, in conjunction with the 25th Scientific Conference of the Nutrition Society of Malaysia. In anticipation of the release of this new set of guidelines, I would like to discuss the concept, rationale, and approaches to the preparation of dietary guidelines in this write-up. The focus shall be on developments in this country.

FAO/WHO guidance

One of the identified strategies of the World Declaration and Plan of Action for Nutrition, adopted at the International Conference on Nutrition (ICN) in 1992, was the promotion of appropriate diets and healthy lifestyles. Member countries were urged to provide dietary guidelines to the public, relevant for different age groups and lifestyles and appropriate for the country's population.

Following up on the ICN, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and World Health Organisation (WHO) jointly held an expert consultation on the preparation and

use of food-based dietary guidelines in 1995. The consultation provided guidance on the development of guidelines as well as how the guidelines could be used to improve dietary practices.

Dietary guidelines (DGs) are sets of advisory statements that give dietary advice for the population to promote overall nutritional well-being. DGs relate to all diet-related conditions, i.e. nutrient deficiencies as well as nutritional excesses. DGs should be based directly upon diet and health relationships of particular relevance to the individual country. In this way, priorities in establishing dietary guidelines can address the relevant nutrition-related public health concerns.

The FAO/WHO Consultation emphasised that DGs should be clearly differentiated from dietary goals and recommended nutrient intakes (RNI) or recommended dietary allowances (RDA). DGs are broad targets for which people can aim for while RNI indicate what should be consumed on the average every day.

Hence dietary guidelines need to reflect food patterns rather than numerical goals. It is preferable that the messages to the public be in terms of foods, i.e. food-based dietary guidelines (FBDGs).

FBDGs are developed in a specific socio-cultural context and need to reflect relevant social, economic, agricultural, and environmental factors affecting food availability and eating patterns. Public health issues should determine the direction and

relevance of dietary guidelines. These guidelines need to be positive and encourage enjoyment of appropriate dietary intakes.

Dietary guidelines around the world

Most of our neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia have established dietary guidelines for some years. Australian dietary guidelines too have been in existence for many years. The other Asian countries, e.g. China, Japan, and Korea too have published guidelines for their population. Canada updated their guidelines in 2007. The United States review their dietary guidelines every five years and a revised version is expected this year.

Some of these countries have guidelines for specific groups, e.g. pregnant and lactating women, adolescents, in addition to a general set of guidelines for the wide spectrum of the population.

I did a review of official dietary guidelines of 18 countries across the globe and found rather striking similarities in the messages in these guides on healthy eating to the public. At the same time, there are also clear differences in some of the messages. Some topics are highlighted in some countries, but not in others. There is clearly consensus among nutrition scientists in the main messages to the public, while differences in opinion exist in some areas.

I also noted in my review that these countries have also provided different visual guides to the public to help them make food choices and the amounts of each food group to be consumed. These include pyramids, plates, rainbow, and even pagodas. Malaysia has been using the food pyramid and this form of visual guide will remain in the revised dietary guidelines.

Dietary guidelines in Malaysia – the beginning

Various types of food and nutrition guidelines have been formulated in the country by various groups. The first set of guidelines was formulated in the 1970s with the launching of the Applied Food and Nutrition Programme in 1971. Subsequently, various other guidelines were published, including specific guidelines for breastfeeding and weaning.

In cognizance of the increasing incidence of non-communicable diseases, the Ministry of Health launched a comprehensive campaign for the promotion of healthy lifestyles among Malaysians. Additional nutritional and dietary guidelines for the prevention and control of these diseases were formulated with the launching of the five-year Healthy Lifestyle Campaign in 1991.

The Ministry of Health Malaysia recognised that the healthy lifestyle campaigns carried out from 1991 to 1996 needed to be given further impetus to achieve the desired improvements among the communities. Recognising that the inculcation of a culture of healthy eating is the ultimate strategy toward improving the nutritional health of the population, the theme of the first year of the second phase of the Healthy Lifestyle Campaign of the Ministry of Health was "Healthy Eating". A set of dietary guidelines was prepared to promote healthy

eating practices, including some aspects of food safety, nutritional labeling, weight management, and exercise. The food pyramid was also introduced in the country for the first time in 1997.

The first Malaysian dietary guidelines

Following the convening of the International Conference of Nutrition by FAO/WHO in 1992, the National Plan of Action for Nutrition of Malaysia (NPANM) was prepared by an inter-sectoral committee, the National Coordinating Committee for Food and Nutrition (NCCFN). The NPANM identified a variety of programmes and activities to be carried out for the improvement of the nutritional status of Malaysians during the 7th Malaysia Plan period (1996-2000).

Nine thrust areas were identified, including the improvement of the health and nutritional status of the population through the promotion of healthy diets and lifestyles. One of the activities within this thrust area was the establishment of a Technical Working Group for the formulation of a set of Malaysian Dietary Guidelines (MDG). The first official set of MDG was published in 1999, containing eight key messages.

The revised Malaysian dietary guidelines

The NPANM was revised to cover the period from 2006 to 2015. To ensure effective implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the Plan of Action, strategies of the plan are oriented into the Foundation, Enabling, and Facilitating Strategies.

The fourth enabling strategy of NPANM II identified the need to promote healthy eating and active living. And one of the five facilitating strategies calls for ensuring all have access to nutrition information.

The identified activities within these strategies include revision of the Malaysian Dietary Guidelines and the publication and dissemination of educational materials based on these guidelines.

In response to these recommendations, NCCFN requested the Technical Working Group on Nutritional Guidelines to carry out a review of the 1999 Malaysian Dietary Guidelines. The review process took almost two years, involving a large number of nutrition experts in the government sector, academia, and professional bodies.

The revised dietary guidelines are ready and shall be launched at the end of March. It will be a totally revised and revamped science-based guidelines, with 14 key messages. These messages cover the whole range of food and nutrition issues, from importance of consuming a variety of foods to messages for guidance on specific food groups.

The revised guidelines also include specific messages to encourage physical activity, consuming safe food and beverages, and making effective use of nutrition information on food labels. A new food pyramid shall also be revealed!

Effective implementation of dietary guidelines

Dietary guidelines have become

an almost universal tool in food and nutrition policy development and for nutrition promotion. Merely having a set of dietary guidelines, however, will not guarantee an effective nutrition policy or that the population will follow their advice. Attention should be given to advocating these guidelines to policy makers as well as communicating dietary guideline information effectively to the public.

WHO has suggested that two dietary guideline documents be prepared: one of a more quantitative nature for policy-makers and health professionals; the second is a more qualitative in nature for the general public.

The revised Malaysian dietary guidelines shall be disseminated to nutritionists and other healthcare professionals in all health departments in the country. Briefing sessions on the guidelines have been arranged for these professionals. It is hoped that these guidelines will become the guiding principles of nutrition advice to the public. This helps to ensure that consistent and scientifically sound messages are given.

It would be rather confusing to the public and detrimental to nutrition education efforts if individuals or groups promote messages that are not based on scientific consensus.

A great deal remains to be done to ensure that the revised guidelines reach the intended target groups.

It is even a greater challenge to ensure that the consumer adopts these dietary guidelines. What is therefore clearly needed is greater effort by all stakeholders to help the effective implementation of these guidelines.

It is the responsibility of healthcare professionals to ensure that consumers have access to the information. They need to fully understand these messages and help promote them.

The food industry can do its part in helping to disseminate these messages widely through their own network. It can also contribute by making healthier choices of foods available to the public.

The consumer should empower himself with the knowledge contained in these guidelines, and practise the messages recommended. Eventually, it is the consumer himself who must take charge of his own health and that of his family.

■ *NutriScene is a fortnightly column by Dr Tee E Siong, who pens his thoughts as a nutritionist with over 30 years of experience in the research and public health arena. For further information, e-mail starhealth@thestar.com.my. The information provided is for educational and communication purposes only and it should not be construed as personal medical advice. Information published in this article is not intended to replace, supplant or augment a consultation with a health professional regarding the reader's own medical care. The Star does not give any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to the content appearing in this column. The Star disclaims all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.*