



## Rethinking the Dietary Guidelines

By Cynthia Hodgins, DNP, RN, FNP-C

Obesity has reached epidemic proportions,<sup>1,2</sup> and cardiovascular (CV) risk continues as a major health concern.<sup>3,4</sup> One of the tools often used to guide decision making about weight loss and CV risk reduction is the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA), which emphasize a low-fat approach to eating.<sup>5-8</sup> But according to a growing amount of research, the DGA's approach needs rerouting.<sup>8,9</sup>

Two large studies, the Look AHEAD study<sup>2</sup> of 5,145 patients and the Women's Health Initiative study<sup>3</sup> of 48,835 healthy postmenopausal women, found that a low-fat diet does not improve CV risk factors. Other research shows that weight loss alone does not improve CV risk.<sup>10-17</sup>

In spite of the lack of scientific evidence to support the efficacy of the low-fat diet, the DGA's principles have been accepted, recommended and promoted since 1977.<sup>4</sup>

### **Historical Perspective**

The DGA was established to provide guidance to consumers about food choices that promote health and reduce the risk of chronic disease.<sup>4</sup> Revised DGAs have been published by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Department of Agriculture (USDA) every 5 years since 1980. The DHHS and the USDA appoint a committee to write each set of guidelines. The 2015 committee's recommendations and rationale, presented in a report to the secretaries of DHHS and the USDA, is the basis for the 8th edition of the DGA. The draft report, whose content is similar to previous guidelines, was published online earlier this year.<sup>7</sup> Key recommendations are:

1. Prevent and/or reduce overweight and obesity through improved eating and physical activity behaviors.
2. Control total calorie intake to manage body weight, consume fewer calories from foods and beverages, and increase physical activity.
3. Reduce time spent in sedentary behaviors.
4. Maintain appropriate calorie balance during each stage of life.

**SEE ALSO:** [Mindful Eating as a Weight Loss Method](#)

### **Raising Questions**

Based on the literature, the DGA's emphasis on low-fat eating warrants careful consideration. The Women's Health Initiative Randomized Controlled Dietary Modification Trial<sup>3</sup> found that a low-fat diet with increased intake of vegetables, fruits and grains "did not significantly reduce the risk of coronary heart disease, stroke or cardiovascular disease (CVD) in postmenopausal women and achieved only modest effects on CVD risk factors."<sup>3</sup> And researchers in the Look AHEAD study prematurely stopped the

CVD arm because the intensive diet and exercise program resulted in weight loss but did not reduce CV events in people with type 2 diabetes.<sup>2</sup> Other research shows that a low-fat diet is effective for weight loss but not for improving CV risk factors.<sup>10-14</sup> Frisch et al<sup>12</sup> and Halton et al<sup>15</sup> performed randomized, controlled trials to determine the efficacy of carbohydrate-reduced or fat-reduced diets. Despite favorable effects on weight, the carbohydrate-reduced diet was more beneficial for CV risk. Greater weight loss and better improvement of CV risk parameters have occurred with energy-restricted, low-carbohydrate diets than energy-restricted, low-fat diets.<sup>11,16,17</sup> In light of this, more scientific voices say the DGA should advocate a low-carbohydrate dietary pattern as an alternative dietary strategy for obesity and CVD risk.<sup>11,16,17</sup>

## References

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- Cynthia Hodgins is a nurse practitioner who owns TLC Medical Weight Loss clinic in Austin, Texas ([www.tlcweightlossclinic.com](http://www.tlcweightlossclinic.com)).*

