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## Aligning food composition tables with current dietary guidance for consumers

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### Abstract

**Background:** Federal dietary guidance for consumers in the United States includes three pillars: the Dietary Guidelines for Americans; the Dietary Reference Intakes (DRIs); and the information on food packages (including the Nutrition Facts Label). Food composition tables (FCT) should include information that is relevant to these types of dietary guidance. **Objective:** To review food composition variables that are meaningful in this public health context. **Description:** New dietary guidance focuses on three public health concerns: (1) achieving nutrient adequacy; (2) maintaining a healthy body weight; and (3) reducing risk of chronic diseases. To evaluate nutrient adequacy, nutrients with a DRI should be included on a FCT, and the units in which the recommendations are expressed should match those on the FCT. New ways to describe diets that promote a healthy weight have been suggested with an emphasis on decreasing intakes of empty calories (e.g., solid fats and added sugars) and choosing foods with a high nutrient density and a low energy density. To reduce risk of chronic diseases, dietary variables of interest are sodium and potassium, fatty acids, and descriptors of carbohydrate quality. Some of these themes are also seen in the recent recommendations by an Institute of Medicine Committee on front of package labelling. **Conclusions:** These types of variables are desirable in FCTs that will be accessed by consumers, or used to evaluate consumers' adherence with dietary guidance. Developers of FCTs should ensure that their tables align with the latest developments in consumer guidance.

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### 1. Introduction: What types of dietary guidance are available to consumers?

Dietary guidance for consumers in the United States rests on three major pillars: the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGs) [1], the Dietary Reference Intakes (DRIs) [2], and the educational information on

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food packages, including the Nutrition Facts Label [3]. To be effective, these types of guidance should be consistent and synergistic. Food composition tables (FCTs) can play an important role in helping consumers apply this guidance to their own food choices, but only if the FCTs keep pace with current dietary recommendations. There have been several important changes recently, many of which will require new variables on FCTs, as well as the new values for existing variables.

## **2. How has dietary guidance changed recently?**

### *2.1. Dietary Guidelines for Americans*

The DGs summarize and synthesize knowledge about individual nutrients and food components into an interrelated set of recommendations for healthy eating that can be adopted by the public [1]. By law, the DGs must be reviewed, and updated if necessary, every five years. The 2010 DGs include several changes from the 2005 DGs. To help consumers follow the DGs, pictorial food guides have traditionally been developed. MyPyramid was developed for the 2005 DGs [4], and MyPlate is now available for the 2010 DGs [5]. Although the food grouping scheme that was used for MyPyramid is largely retained in 2010, there is a new red-orange vegetable group, and juices have been separated from whole fruits and vegetables.

### *2.2. Dietary Reference Intakes*

The DRIs are nutrient standards for the US and Canada that are set by the Institute of Medicine [2]. They include average nutrient requirements (Estimated Average Requirements (EARs)) and recommended intakes (Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs) and Adequate Intakes (AIs)), as well as upper levels of nutrient intakes that should not be exceeded (Tolerable Upper Intake Levels (ULs)). The DRIs have been released in a series of reports since 1997, and summarized in a report in 2006 [2]. In 2010, a new report was released that updated the nutrient standards for calcium and vitamin D [6]. Of particular importance is the change in the recommended intake values for these two nutrients, from an Adequate Intake to a Recommended Dietary Allowance, and the availability of an Estimated Average Requirement which allows a better assessment of the adequacy of intakes of a group of people [7]. In addition, the values for the ULs were updated.

### *2.3. Labels on food products*

Labels on food products provide an opportunity to educate consumers about the composition of processed and prepared foods. The Nutrition Facts label was required on food products as part of the 1990 Nutrition Labeling and Education Act, and relates the nutrient levels in a serving of the food item to Daily Values that are based on the 1968 RDAs [3]. Changes to the Daily Values are likely to be prescribed by the Food and Drug Administration in the near future. The new values will be based on the most recent DRIs. It is also possible that the FDA will issue guidelines for information that can be used on front-of-package (FOP) labeling. A recent IOM Committee issued a report with recommendations for FOP labeling (in addition to the Nutrition Facts label, which is typically on the back of the package) [8]. The committee recommended that the FOP label show calories per serving, as well saturated fat, sodium, and added sugars in a serving.

## **3. Recent changes in dietary guidance focus on major public health concerns**

The recent changes in dietary guidance are in response to growing public health concerns in three primary areas: achieving nutrient adequacy, maintaining a healthy body weight, and reducing the risk of

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