

Working Together to Create a Healthier Eating Environment for All

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Our nation's health is in crisis, with overweight and obesity affecting two out of three adults and one out of three children in America. This in turn has led to rising mortality and morbidity rates.

Poor eating patterns coupled with lack of physical activity are the primary culprits of declining health. With only 1% of Americans adhering to the 2010 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* (DGAs) recommendation of three servings of whole grains per day, the collaborative effort of registered dietitians (RDs); dietetic technicians, registered (DTRs); food technologists; and scientists is essential to educate consumers and create whole grain products that are appealing for regular, daily consumption.

As a registered dietitian, as an educator of dietetics students, and as the 2011–2012 President of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, I see firsthand every day that change is needed. How do we make this change happen?

First, we need to look at what Americans are eating. According to the U. S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service, in 2009, processed foods—including refined grains—topped the list of foods consumed in the United States at 63%, whereas plant foods like whole grains made up just 12% of the U.S. food consumption.

How can we, collectively—RDs, DTRs, food scientists, and technologists—change American eating patterns? The answer lies in working together.

The task of bringing healthful food to consumers is contingent upon integrating food and nutrition science by building a collaborative relationship between food scientists, technologists, manufacturers, and nutrition professionals. With America's poor eating patterns in mind, a robust dialogue was undertaken in 2010 by scientists who formulate, innovate, and renovate food products and by nutrition professionals who counsel clients and communicate dietary guidance to the public, which resulted in the 2010 DGAs.

The principal action themes in the DGAs are to:

- Reduce overweight and obesity by reducing overall caloric intake
- Shift food patterns to a more plant-based diet that emphasizes vegetables, cooked dry beans and peas, fruit,

whole grains, nuts, and seeds

- Reduce intake of foods containing solid fat and added sugars ("SoFAs"), refined grains, and sodium

Ideally, the DGAs have paved the way for RDs to continue to work with foods scientists and technologists to create healthy food products that are practical, likeable, and affordable.

Realistic Eating Remedies

Creating realistic eating patterns to help people connect the dots between eating and health is important to the overall health of the nation. In order to form lasting dietary change in America, discouraging extreme dietary change to create achievable changes embraces best practices of nutrition professionals.

One of the key components of successful dietary change, per the January 2010 issue of the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, is for individual consumers to be truly motivated by nutrition science as it relates to human health. With this in mind, RDs are front and center in educating consumers about realistic ways to implement the Dietary Guidelines—in kitchens, grocery stores, hospitals, and doctors' offices, as well as in the media via print, broadcast, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media. Food and nutrition professionals need to provide real eating options for people, such as ways to reduce calories to achieve portion control with sample meals plans, sensible meal preparation techniques, and effective ways to dine out without breaking the calorie bank.

Moving Forward with the Whole Grains Initiative

While our goal is for adults to consume 48 grams of whole grains every day, the majority of Americans are not consuming enough, and 20% of the U.S. population consumes virtually no whole grain products at all. It is vital that food and nutrition professionals move forward with the whole grains initiative to garner consumer awareness and increase consumption of whole grains. This begins with basic nutrition education as well as access to good-tasting, affordable whole grain products.

We know whole grains offer a host of health benefits, and RDs are on the front lines making the value of whole grains shine. With the 2010 Dietary Guidelines calling obesity "the single greatest threat to public health this century," the value of whole grains for weight management, as well as a high-fiber defense in diet-related chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and certain cancers such as breast and colorectal cancers, is an important educational point for consumers.

Plus, nutrition science has shown the link between soluble fi-

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ber found in whole grains and cholesterol levels remaining in a healthy range, as well as insoluble fiber keeping the colon functioning smoothly. The combination of both fibers keeps blood sugar levels stable throughout the day and is satiating on fewer calories, which helps with long-term weight management.

In March, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics emphasized the power of whole grains in its 2012 National Nutrition Month campaign, which had the theme of “Get Your Plate in Shape.” With the Dietary Guidelines and their MyPlate icon as the prominent spotlights of National Nutrition Month, the key message of “make at least half of your grains whole grains” was a natural and vital part of this campaign. For the “grains” quarter of a person’s plate, the emphasis was on whole grain breads, pasta, rice, oatmeal, breakfast cereals, tortillas, and grits.

Nutrition Trends Survey Revealed

Knowing what people eat and why is vital to understanding how best to educate the public and what products will appeal to them. Over the past 20 years, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics has conducted eight nationwide surveys of Americans’ nutrition knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs. The resounding feedback from these surveys is that people eat what they like and like what they eat.

For some people, healthful eating and exercise are a part of their everyday lifestyle; for others it is not—for various reasons. The bottom line from the Academy’s survey findings is that there is room for improvement.

On a positive note, consumers are getting the message about the health benefits whole grains. According to the Academy’s 2011 survey, 92% believe whole grain breads were healthier than white bread. Of those people who thought whole grains to be healthier, 64% said it was much healthier, 27% said it was somewhat healthier, and 9% said it was slightly healthier. Compared to five years ago, according to the Academy’s 2011 survey, people are eating more whole grains and making them a top priority in their meal planning.

Convenience plays a role, as whole grains are found in many quickly prepared foods like dried pasta, ready-to-eat cereals, and crackers.

Educating Consumers on Whole Grains

An important part of getting people to eat whole grains is education. It is the job of RDs and DTRs as well as food scientists and technologists to teach people how to determine what a whole grain is by looking for the word “whole” as part of the grain. In accordance with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, whole grains must contain 51% whole grain flour by weight of final product.

As food and nutrition professionals, it is important that we relay the actual definition of whole grain as the “intact, ground, cracked, or flaked fruit of the grains whose principal components—the starchy endosperm, germ, and bran—are present in the same relative proportions as they exist in the intact grain.”

With so many grain-based products flooding the marketplace, steering consumers in the right direction is important by accessing their dietary needs in accordance with their overall health. For people with celiac disease or gluten intolerance, steering them toward appropriate whole grain products is vital; yet for people who do not have a medical necessity, we must encourage daily consumption of whole grains, as they contain fiber, B-vitamins, essential fats, and some protein in certain

grains (quinoa, amaranth, etc.).

From a weight loss and management perspective, nutrient-dense whole grains have been shown to provide appetite satisfaction with fewer calories for longer periods of time. Thus, people eat less and lose and maintain weight over the long-term. Additionally, the fiber in whole grains can stabilize blood sugar and lead to fewer cravings throughout the day.

The Convenience Factor

A barrier to whole grain consumption is that many consumers believe whole grains are time-consuming to prepare and require more culinary skill. With convenience an attractive trait in our fast-paced society and cooking falling by the wayside, product innovations and simple culinary know-how are much needed.

Registered dietitians are on the front lines teaching consumers how to prepare quick whole grain meals after a long work day as well as empowering them to save time and calories with more nutrient-dense options like instant brown rice, quick-cooking oats, and 10-minute quinoa dishes.

When educating, as well creating whole grain products, for various ethnic groups, it is important to recommend grains that are culturally appropriate, such as brown rice as part of an Asian meal, whole grain couscous as part of an African meal, quinoa for a South American meal, whole grain naan bread for an Asian Indian meal, and bulgur wheat as part of a German meal.

Whole grains are not a one-size-fits-all proposition. They can fit into every lifestyle. We need to collaborate on best practices for every population. In addition, gastrointestinal diseases like celiac disease, irritable bowel syndrome, gluten intolerance, and allergies require the use of selected grains—another area in which an RD’s or DTR’s guidance is crucial.

Keep It Simple

Visuals work well as an educational tool as well as signify to consumers which products contain some, if not 100%, whole grains. In grocery stores, whole grain products can easily be identified on packages, boxes, and bags if consumers know what to look for.

The Whole Grains Council has a stamp that allows product manufacturers to educate consumers on the whole grain content of their products. The Whole Grain Stamp is a highly recognizable symbol to consumers of healthful products which contain significant amounts of whole grains—one stamp is for products which contain eight grams or more whole grains per serving and the other stamp is for products with 100% whole grains per serving.

Conclusion

The key to achieving greater, long-term health change is working together. Registered dietitians and DTRs are tirelessly collaborating with patients, clients, food scientists, technologists, manufacturers, educators, and government agencies to create viable whole grain products to ensure Americans are aligning their dietary behaviors with the recommendations of the 2010 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. By keeping the messages simple, clear, and easy to execute, we can help Americans achieve the goal of eating at least three 1 oz servings of whole grains every day.