

Chewing the Fat

By Reg P. Wydeven
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This year our family had one of the greatest holiday seasons ever. We attended numerous family gatherings where we had delicious feasts. We were invited to several holiday parties where we had yummy candy and Christmas cookies. We saw 'Star Wars: The Force Awakens' (some of us saw it twice) and had treats at the theater. We watched a ton of Christmas movies while enjoying snacks and eggnog.

Needless to say, I am a huge fan of pants with elastic waistbands. Like a lot of Americans, I indulged a lot over the holidays while thoroughly enjoying time with loved ones. But in the New Year, it's time to buckle down and try to put my fat pants away for another 11 months.

Thankfully, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services gave me some help by releasing new dietary guidelines about what I am supposed to eat. The USDA told CBS News that the new guidelines reflect "advancements in scientific understanding about healthy eating choices and health outcomes over a lifetime."

These guidelines are extremely important, as they are the basis for school lunch menus, public nutrition programs, food labels and medical research grants. The standards impact dozens of government health programs and policies and influence what foods America produces, buys, and eats.

To no one's surprise, the government is recommending that I eat more fruits and vegetables while consuming less sugar and saturated fat. To my delight, however, the new dietary guidelines don't say anything about avoiding junk food, fast food, processed food, meat or soda. But many nutrition watchdog groups did not share my enthusiasm.

Like me, these organizations were less focused on what the guidelines said compared to what they didn't say. While the experts were pleased about the recommendations to eat less sugar and fat, they feel the agencies stopped short of saying what Americans should not eat.

The guidelines are based, in part, on a report issued by the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee, which is assembled by the government and made up of experts in the fields of health and nutrition. The Advisory Committee bases its recommendations on thousands of pages of published research, and their report is open to public comment.

While the new guidelines impart some of the Committee's recommendations, they also stray from them significantly and the watchdogs point to the food industry. They feel that like big tobacco, the food industry has powerful lobbyists.

The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine is actually suing the government, claiming the egg industry used its influence to try to weaken warnings about cholesterol. Dr. Neal Barnard, who is president of the non-profit organization, explained that, "These are multibillion dollar industries that put a huge amount of effort not just into advertising their products, but into changing federal policy." He elaborated by saying, "The egg industry is paying universities where these people are, then putting them on the committee to decide whether eggs are safe or not. That's a conflict of interest."

The USDA contends its process is "robust and transparent" and the new guidelines are "grounded in the most current scientific evidence" to help people "make healthy food and beverage choices."

To be safe, I'll stick to just vegetables, like onion rings and French fried potatoes.

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