

The Beef You Love Is Good For You

What does the revised food pyramid mean to beef producers?

by *Brooke Byrd*

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has tried to shape the way we eat since 1916. While protein has always been included as a necessary part of a balanced diet, beef has sometimes gotten the short end of the stick in the media and in the mind of the consumer. However, the revised food pyramid offers beef a chance to show off its best attributes, and opens the door to beef producers everywhere to showcase their product as a healthful and necessary part of an everyday diet.

USDA's food guidance has continually evolved alongside nutritional

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science. "As the science changes, food guidance needs to change," says Eric Hentges, executive director of the USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP). That's why, after 13 years of using the Food Guide Pyramid as its primary food guidance system, USDA released a revised graphic design and updated food guidance system April 19, 2005.

Healthy steps

Hentges offers two reasons for this change.

"The first one was the science," he explains. Since the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) Institute of Medicine (IOM) updated the standards for nutrient intake, Hentges says, "We need to reflect that."

The second reason, he notes, is that while the original food pyramid had an 80% man-on-the-street recognition, only a single-digit percentage of the population was putting it to use. "We needed to update our consumer research to get a better implementation," Hentges says.

To encourage more widespread implementation, the new pyramid was steered a different direction, with a major goal of assisting people in using the guidance in their everyday

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diets. "The emphasis now is on individualizing it and personalizing it," he explains.

To replace the original food guide pyramid, USDA introduced MyPyramid online with the slogan "Steps to a healthier you," Hentges notes. After inputting various personal details such as gender, age and physical activity level into the MyPyramid Plan, he says, 12 caloric levels will give a dietary pattern appropriate for the individual.

The idea of taking small steps to being healthy, he

continues, is that people don't have to reach perfect all at once. "Take those small steps to make a change in your diet," Hentges says. "Make a change in your physical activity so you can adopt those for a lifetime and add to those steps to head toward a more ideal goal."

Another key message of the new MyPyramid, he notes, is "getting the most nutrition for your calories."

Because the population is growing more and more sedentary, Hentges explains that people in the U.S. are now almost two-thirds overweight and obese.

"People don't have a whole lot of extra calories to spend that aren't bringing good nutrients with

them," he says. For that reason, one of the new recommendations within the protein group is to eat more lean cuts of meat.

Redder is better

Mary Young, executive director of nutrition with the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) and a registered dietitian, says the changes in the food pyramid could have positive effects for beef down the road.

"In looking at the new pyramid now, all of the food groups hit the bottom," she says. "The old pyramid could be misinterpreted as the food groups that fell closer to the top, such as the meat and dairy groups, were less important." The new pyramid, she says, shows the importance of choosing from all five food groups every day for a healthy diet.

Even though the recommended portion size and amount per day of beef remains small, Young says the renewed emphasis on nutrient-dense foods helps recover any losses a smaller portion size might cause.

"The pyramid is trying to communicate getting more nutrition out of your calories," she says. "We're consuming too many calories, but a significant portion of the population isn't getting enough nutrients. People need to be getting smarter calories."

USDA is emphasizing that each food choice be packed with nutrients. That's a good thing, Young says. "Beef is one of the most nutrient-rich foods available in the marketplace and one of the most nutrient-dense foods in the meat group," she explains. "A 3-ounce (oz.) serving of beef is an excellent source of five nutrients and a good source of four."

Another advantage of the new pyramid, Young says, is the opportunity to dispel the misperception that red meat is bad for you. "For 20-30 years, the prevailing recommendation out there was 'lower your saturated fat intake.' There still remains a concern about saturated fat in the diet," she says.

Because of that concern, and because of USDA recommendations for consumers to turn to leaner cuts of meat, Young says beef stands a real chance to profit.

"There are many lean cuts of beef that fit government

Balancing beef

Beef can lead consumers toward a healthier lifestyle by including other foods in its recipes, says Mary Young, registered dietitian and National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) executive director of nutrition.

"There are those fruits and vegetables and whole grains that people don't like to eat," she says. "If you pair them with America's favorite protein, you're more likely to have consumers out there meeting the broad spectrum of the Dietary Guidelines."

"It's no surprise Americans have a love affair with beef, so pair their beef with whole grains, fruits and vegetables, and they're more apt to have a more nutrient-rich diet and meet those guidelines for foods they're not taking in," she explains.

Eric Hentges, executive director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP), agrees. "Beef is a very integral part of the whole balance," he says. He commends the beef industry on maintaining balance with its product, and showing "beef as part of a healthy diet and depicting in their recipes that balance of all food groups."

To further promote eating beef with other healthy foods, NCBA is working on a cookbook in partnership with the American Dietetic Association (ADA), featuring lean beef cooked with fruits, vegetables and whole grains. *The Healthy Beef Cookbook* is due out in fall 2005 and will feature more than 130 recipes.

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guidelines for lean,” she says. “When you look at retail data, 17 of the top 20 most popular cuts sold are lean beef cuts.” Of the whole muscle cuts sold, she says, 68% of them are lean beef cuts. (See the “Consumer Focus” column in the March 2005 *Angus Journal* for details about nutrients and lean cuts of beef.)

“As a dietitian, I’m really proud to work for this industry because producers have responded,” Young says. During her 12 years of work for the beef industry, Young has seen the number of lean cuts grow from only seven to the current 19.

“That hasn’t just happened by trimming,” she says. “That’s happened by producers saying, ‘I’m going to do something different.’”

Plus, she says, sometime soon USDA is going to update its nutrient database. “Those 19 lean cuts are going up to 29,” she states.

Industry assistance

The reason USDA is able to update its database to incorporate changes in beef, Hentges says, is because of input and assistance from the beef industry.

“I would compliment the industry for staying on top of the nutrient composition of the product and working with the USDA database so all of that information is reflected,” he says. Without that information, he notes, changes in beef products can’t be incorporated into the food patterns or online interactive tools.

Hentges also recognizes the importance of the beef industry in building a better product. “We can put out the best Dietary Guidelines with the best science and do education programs such as MyPyramid, but that’s only half the battle to get changes in behavior in the U.S.,” he says. “The other half of the battle is the industry recognizing its role, responsibility and opportunity to make those changes.

“If the industry doesn’t respond, then the consumer doesn’t have the same options,” Hentges continues. He offers the specific example of beef’s battle with health problems from saturated fats and cholesterol.

“The beef industry recognized some of the health issues,” he says, “and made a concerted effort to reflect changes in their product, leading to those 19 lean cuts.”

Longer, better and healthier

Beef can help people live longer, better and healthier lives, says Sarah Donohoe, Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) home economist. “Many of the nutrients from zinc and protein really help with the growth and development and maintenance of our bodies,” she notes. “Protein is a building block for our muscles, for our organs, and even our bones.”

The B vitamins found in beef help to maintain the health and growth of cells, Donohoe explains. “They also work to help pull out energy from other food,” she says. “Not only are they working on our growth and development, but they’re helping ensure that we’re getting all the nutrients we can from other foods.”

Iron is crucial for our immune systems, she notes, as it carries oxygen to our cells and tissues and contributes to making red blood cells.

Mary Young, registered dietitian and National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA) executive director of nutrition, says beef helps build strong minds and strong bodies. For growing babies and children, iron and zinc are crucial to developing cognitive abilities, she says, including their abilities to think, memorize and stay on task.

In addition, Young notes, “There is some emerging science that shows that beef is important to cognitive health throughout our life cycle. If we look at baby boomers, it becomes even more important for the large segment of the population that’s looking to maintain their cognitive function.” She says studies show that both iron and zinc, as well as B vitamins, could potentially help prevent age-related dementias. “They could play a role in preventing Alzheimer’s, helping maintain our cognitive function as we age,” Young explains.

Another issue important to the aging population in the United States is bone health and concerns about osteoporosis, Young points out. “There have been some studies that have shown that beef in the diet has decreased the risk of fractures as a result of a fall as we age,” she says. “There are numerous studies that are showing that animal protein, along with adequate calcium in the diet, is important for bone health.”

Important for a population plagued by obesity, the protein and specific amino acids in beef are used in weight management, Young notes. More research is being conducted about the role of protein in losing weight, maintaining weight loss and maintaining muscle mass. “One of the keys to managing our weight is maintaining our muscle mass or developing muscle mass if we’ve lost it from years of dieting,” she says.

“We want people to be able to enjoy delicious, tasty food, but we want them to understand that not only is beef delicious and tasty, it’s good for you,” Young emphasizes.

CAB’s share

There are often questions about how *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) product fits into nutritional standards, says Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Home Economist Sarah Donohoe. She explains that while some consumers may be concerned about the higher marbling in CAB product, it’s important they look at protein on a broader scale.

Donohoe notes how people cook and eat different types of protein. “If consumers buy chicken because it’s lower in fat, how many people actually just bake that chicken with nothing on it?” she explains. “With CAB, it’s maybe a gram or two more fat, so

that’s less than adding a pat of butter to your baked potato.”

However, by eating beef in general, and CAB in particular, she says, “You’re significantly increasing the flavor of that meal.” Worries about eating too much fat can easily be remedied by not putting as much butter on a potato or dressing on a salad, she says.

“We require a little additional marbling because we’re all about great taste,” Donohoe notes. “We get a number of questions from consumers about whether marbling is fat and not good, but when you compare higher marbling levels from CAB to Choice to Select, it only slightly increases overall fat content.”

Instead of consumers searching out a decrease in quality grade to avoid fat and end up missing a good eating experience, Donohoe says CAB turns the consumer’s

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attention to the many lean cuts of beef available.

Donohoe is not worried about CAB's share in the marketplace. "Because our standards are higher than those of USDA Choice, the brand's product requirements improve overall eating satisfaction," she says. "As we continue, high-quality beef will continue to be in demand at the consumer level."

And, in return, Donohoe says, "We see

value going back to producers whose cattle meet our *Certified Angus Beef* standards."

From the production side

"The important thing to note with 'lean beef' is that it refers to a growing and long list of cuts regardless of quality grade," says Steve Suther, CAB director of industry information. "As consumers try these new, leaner cuts, they will find more satisfaction in better-marbled beef.

"Producers should continue to work toward what consumers want, using genetics and management to deliver marbling and muscling without the external fat," he continues. "Consumers and doctors want us to avoid the waste fat, but keep the taste fat."

This might require a change in management, Suther notes. "For a couple of years, the combination of short supplies of finished cattle, cheap corn and expensive feeder cattle have pressured the market to accept more outside fat than consumers want or need," he explains. "Fat on the floor of the packinghouse has some, although very low, value. But, it is worth it for a packer to keep up tonnage in these times of short supply."

However, he states that as the number of cattle in the U.S. grows, packers will be able to pick and choose more readily. "The market will stop tolerating overfat cattle, and these will be hit with big discounts," he says. "Packers would much rather ship high-quality lean beef out the back door than tubs of fat."

As consumers following food pyramid recommendations try lean cuts of beef, Suther says, "We need to make sure they have the best eating experience possible. That requires beef with marbling. They will remember the grade and, of course, the brand that delivers eating satisfaction."

MyPyramid has drawn the attention of consumers, with more than 50 million hits on the Web site the first day, and more than 823 million hits since the site was unveiled, Hentges says. To personalize your own food pyramid, download educational materials and see nutritional details, visit www.mypyramid.gov.



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