

Where's the beef? Food guide changed after industry outcry



Producers' complaints changed color of food rainbow.

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The federal government put more meat and eggs in the revised Canada Food Guide and backed off on other recommendations after complaints from the food industry, documents show.

Health and Welfare Canada redrew its colorful rainbow chart to double the recommended servings of meat and eggs, change guides on fat and drop suggested limits for sweets and coffee.

Prepared in a secretive manner similar to the drafting of a federal budget, 4.5 million copies of the Food Guide were released in November after five years of consultation.

"It is important to understand that the Food Guide is based on nutrition and food science," a background booklet says. But documents obtained under Access to Information by Ottawa researcher Ken Rubin show significant changes won by the food industry before it was published.

During 1991, the government sent several prototypes of the chart to so-called "stakeholders" for comment, and held workshops. Food producers were disturbed by what they saw.

"At the workshop, I got the impression the food guide is trying to accommodate a vegetarian eating pattern," complained Mary Ann Yaromich, nutrition manager of Canada Pork Inc.

The proposed guide cut the recommended minimum servings of meat from two a day to one. And it suggested meat alternatives, such as tofu,

beans and legumes.

"I do not think (one) 50-gram serving is sufficient, even for preschoolers," wrote Patricia Scarlett, national nutrition co-ordinator of the Beef Information Centre.

"We find it unacceptable and strongly protest that the serving size of eggs be reduced from two eggs (100 g) in the previous guide to one egg (50 g) in the proposed revision," wrote Claire Cronier of the Canadian Egg Marketing Agency.

The Dairy Farmers of Canada objected to a proposed reduction in milk servings for teenagers to three servings, from the previous three-to-four.

In each case, changes were made. The Food Guide now recommends two to three servings of meat or alternatives daily. It increased the egg serving size to allow two eggs. Teens are advised to drink up to four cups of milk.

Some health professionals have criticized the guide. "It is still being used by the meat and dairy industries to encourage excessive use of animal proteins," Shirley Wade-Linton, a British Columbia dietician, said in a letter to the Citizen.

However, government officials say food producers didn't exert undue influence on the guide. "It was definitely not a bargaining table," said Health and Welfare nutrition programs officer Halina Cyr.

Cyr said meat servings were increased when Health and Welfare decided to raise the minimum age requirement.

Regarding eggs, Cyr said the guide's creators

made a judgment call in applying nutrition guidelines. "We felt that in applying them, even if people had two eggs some days, and used them in moderation, then that would be OK."

Milk servings for teenagers were presented as a range, to be more consistent with serving ranges offered other groups such as infants and mothers.

Other changes were more subtle. The dairy industry was angry the guide focused on milk fat while ignoring the benefits of calcium.

"Why are milk products being identified by their fat content?" asked Louis Balcaen, president of the Dairy Farmers of Canada. The guide's wording was changed to recommend "lower-fat" dairy foods, rather than "low-fat."

Disturbed by recommendations that sweets should "not exceed the equivalent of eight (teaspoons of) sugar," the sugar industry objected.

The Food Guide now makes no direct mention of sugar. Cyr said the eight-teaspoon limit wasn't a formal recommendation.

After the Coffee Association of Canada objected to a recommendation the Canadian diet contain no more caffeine than the equivalent of four cups of coffee a day, the wording was changed.

A supplement to the nutrition chart simply says 400 to 450 milligrams of caffeine a day doesn't increase the risk of heart disease, hypertension or birth defects for most people.

The prototype chart showed two pots of beans, as both a vegetable and a meat alternative. The chart was revised to show just one pot.