

## The Balanced Diet

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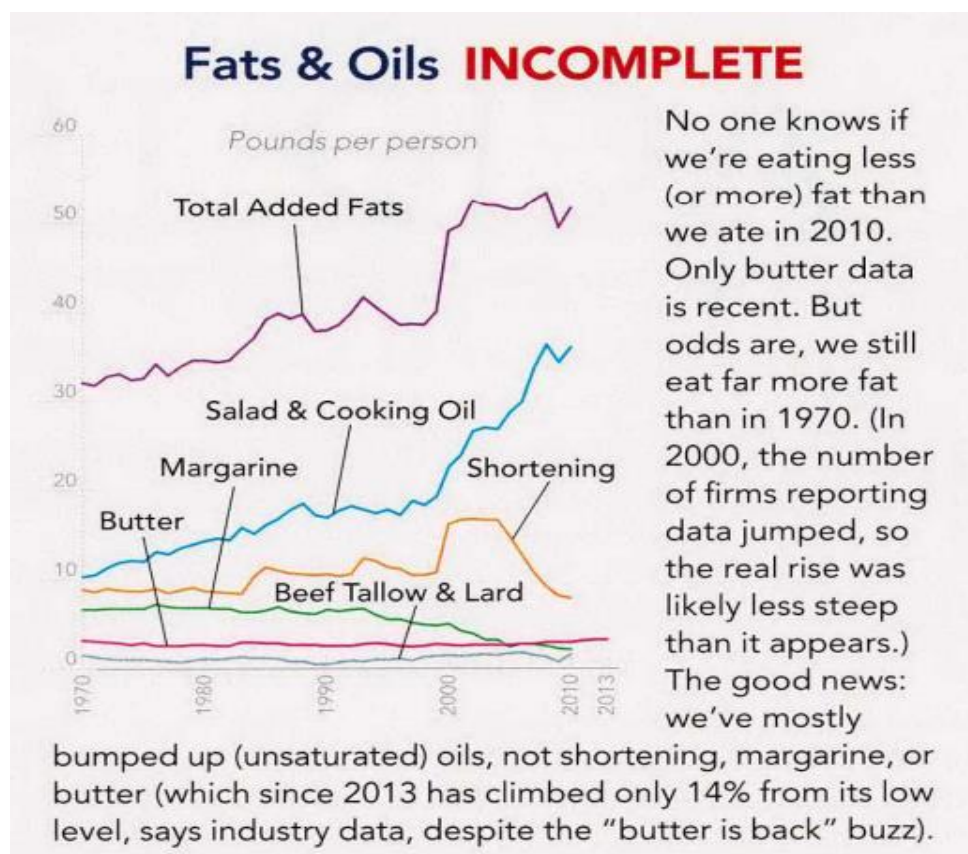
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### Abstract

Food is much more than sustenance needed for survival in current times. Food has become something to be shared with others and enjoyed, as well as utilized effectively to achieve a desired physical appearance or health. A balanced diet is critical for maintaining health and preventing future complications or health problems. Various studies regarding healthy eating have found that consumers on average have a relatively poor understanding of what constitutes a healthy diet (Adriaanse et al., 2017). The majority of diets in the United States have high levels of sugar and fat, largely contributing to the health problems prevalent within the country (Gray, 2016). To solve this problem, the government has implemented strategies targeted at children to reduce the amount of sugar and fat intake by providing alternatives such as low-fat, low-sodium, and sugar-free options (Gray, 2016). It has been concluded that developing healthy consumption patterns at a young age greatly influences food preferences for the future. There has also been emphasis on increasing the amount of vegetables, fruits, nuts, beans, cereal grains, olive oil, fish, and certain amounts of dairy and meat (Gray, 2016). This research paper will detail the current trends seen today with the average American diet and contrast those trends with the ideal balanced diet. The ideal healthy diet will also be explained in detail.

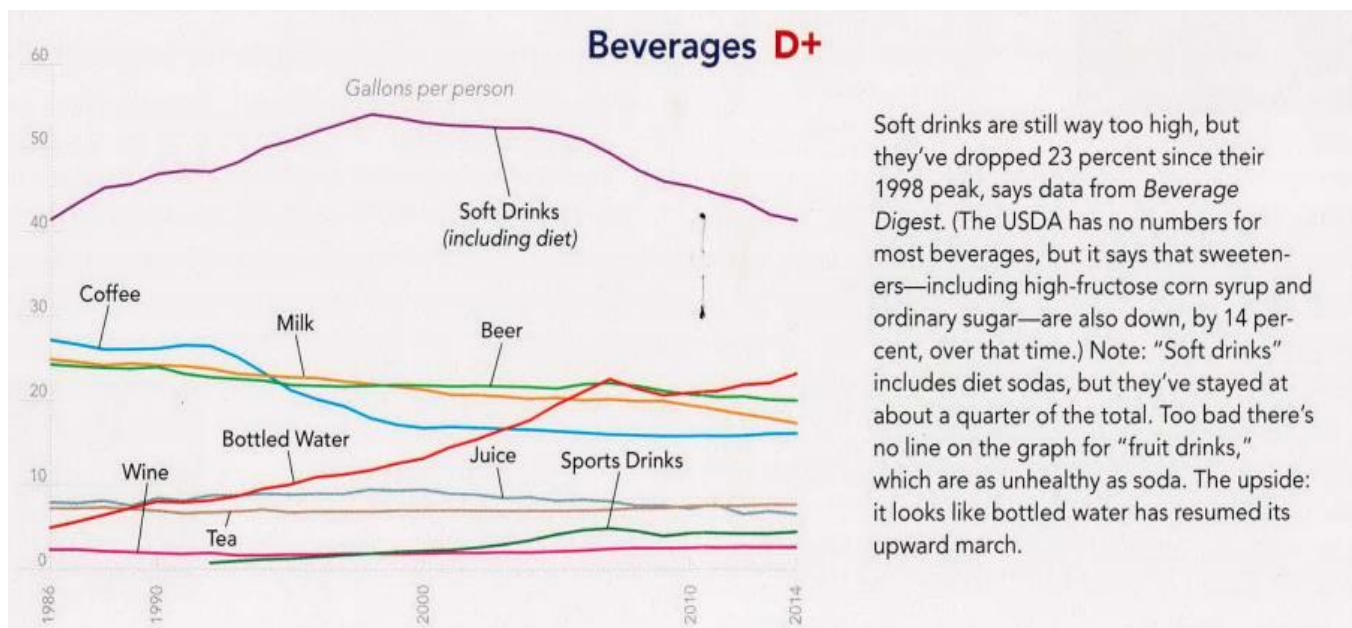
### The Balanced Diet

Eating balanced meals is an important aspect of maintaining health. Whether to promote a healthier lifestyle overall or simply to achieve a desired physical appearance, many strive to eat healthier. In addition to the potential advantages, eating right can prevent future health problems or complications. On average, most Americans have unhealthy eating habits and lack the knowledge of what constitutes a healthy meal. A balanced meal may vary depending on each individual due to differing amounts of physical activity and uncontrollable factors such as gender, but understanding how to eat healthier and what comprises a balanced meal can be the same for every individual.



Liebman, B. (2016). The changing American diet. *Nutrition Action Health Letter*, 43(8), 8-9.

The ideal balanced diet is difficult to achieve for the average American. According to Gray (2016), the vast majority of diets in the United States consist of high levels of fat intake. As stated in a report analyzing the average American diet as a whole, the population is intaking a lot more fat in meals than ever recorded before (Liebman, 2016). According to Liebman (2016), although most of the fat consumed is unsaturated fat from oils and butters, a healthier option than saturated fats common in previous years, the amount of consumption is alarming. With an increase in the amount of fat in diets, there is an increased risk of cardiovascular disease and high cholesterol levels (Siri-Tarino, 2010). Overall, there are numerous negative impacts that fats have on the population and reductions need to be made in order to improve the population's overall health.



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In addition to large amounts of fat in American diets, sugar is consumed in excess as well (Gray, 2016). Much of the sugar intake in the average diet is through soft drinks and other sweet

beverages. According to Liebman (2016), even though soft drink consumption has dropped about 23 percent from the early 2000s, sweeteners such as high-fructose corn syrup and ordinary sugar within the beverages are used more frequently to improve taste. Overall sugar consumption needs to be reduced as well because, combined with high levels of fat intake, it can pose serious health risks on the American population.

Understanding how to achieve a balanced diet by knowing what types of foods to eat more of is just as important as reducing the amount of unhealthy foods consumed. According to a study done on children's diets, it was deduced that consumption patterns at a young age influence food preferences in the future (Cooke, 2007). Cooke (2007) concluded that the children who were exposed to and educated about healthy foods were more likely to eat those foods willingly and enjoy doing so in the future.

Learning from a young age what is considered healthy is more beneficial to individuals than learning about healthy eating once unhealthy consumption patterns have already formed. According to a study done on a group of adolescents, most turn to frequent snacking without taking into account the nutrient values of the snacks (Butcher, 2016). Commonly eaten snacks are often poor in nutrients and may contain fat and sugar. As stated by Butcher (2016), the ability to evaluate the healthiness of snacks is what promotes healthier snack choices in adolescents. Based on this conclusion, it can be stated that fundamental background knowledge about what foods are considered healthy is as necessary as minimizing unhealthy consumption.

A balanced diet is the efficient way of obtaining the necessary amount of calories and nutrients needed for day-to-day functioning without consuming an excess of empty calories. Calories in a food item are defined as the measurement of the amount of energy contained in that food (Krans, 2016). Empty calories are measured by calculating the sum of energy in a food item

from the added sugar and solid fat and are therefore not recommended since they do not provide any nutritional value (Poti, 2014). In order to reduce the amount of empty calories consumed, most caloric intake should come from fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and lean proteins (Krans, 2016).



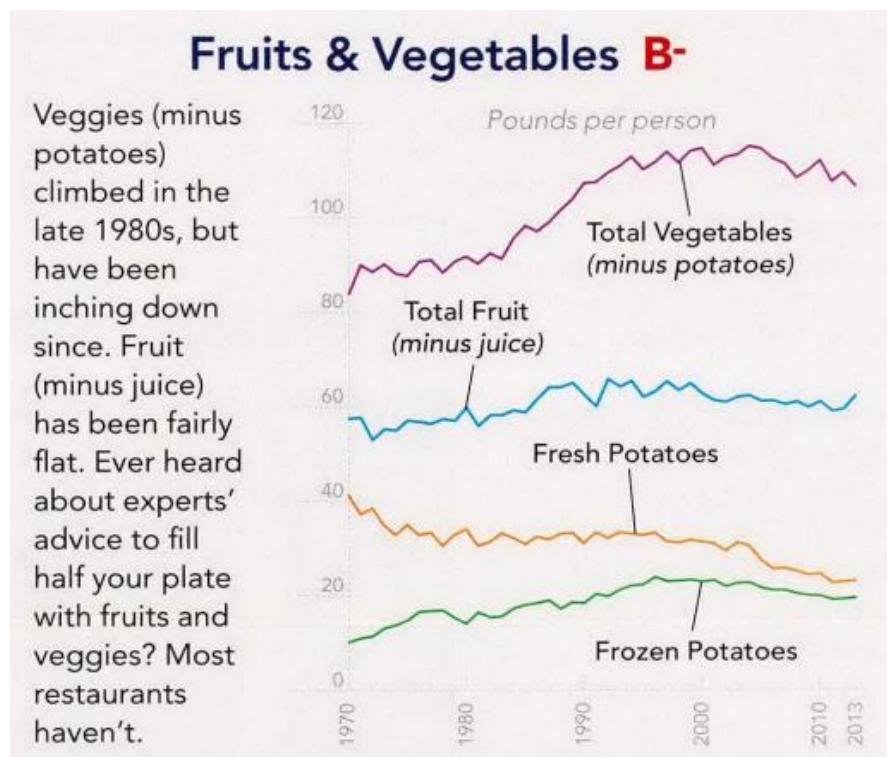
United States Department of Agriculture. (2017, November 13). MyPlate graphic resources.

Retrieved March 7, 2018, from <https://www.choosemyplate.gov/myplate-graphic-resources>

Fresh fruits are rich in nutrients and are very filling as snack options. Fruits are high in sugar, but since the sugar is natural, fruits are ultimately the better option than the sweets that have added sugar (Krans, 2016). Depending on the circumstances of certain individuals, such as those with diabetes who should consume lesser amounts of sugar, low-sugar fruits would be the

best option. Krans (2016) states that citrus fruits and berries are low-sugar options and fruits such as melons and avocados are good for those who are watching their carbohydrate intake.

Primary sources of essential vitamins and minerals are fresh vegetables. Krans (2016) states that dark, leafy green vegetables such as spinach, kale, and green beans contain the most nutrients out of the other food groups. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (2016), all vegetables without any seasoning or dressing have no cholesterol. Since this is the case, vegetables can be eaten to provide filling and nutritious meals for individuals of all conditions of health.

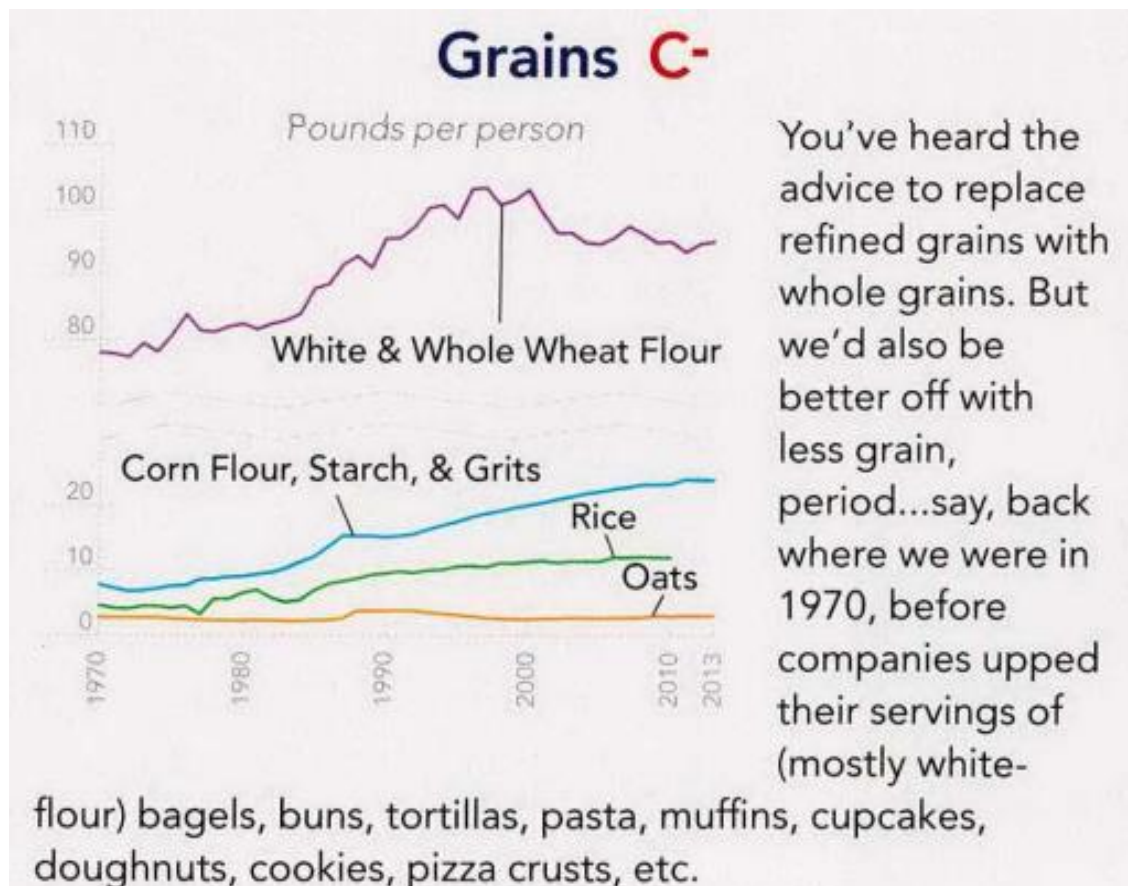


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Consumption of fruits and vegetables have been on the decline in American diets in recent years. According to Liebman (2016), fruit and vegetable popularity has been decreasing



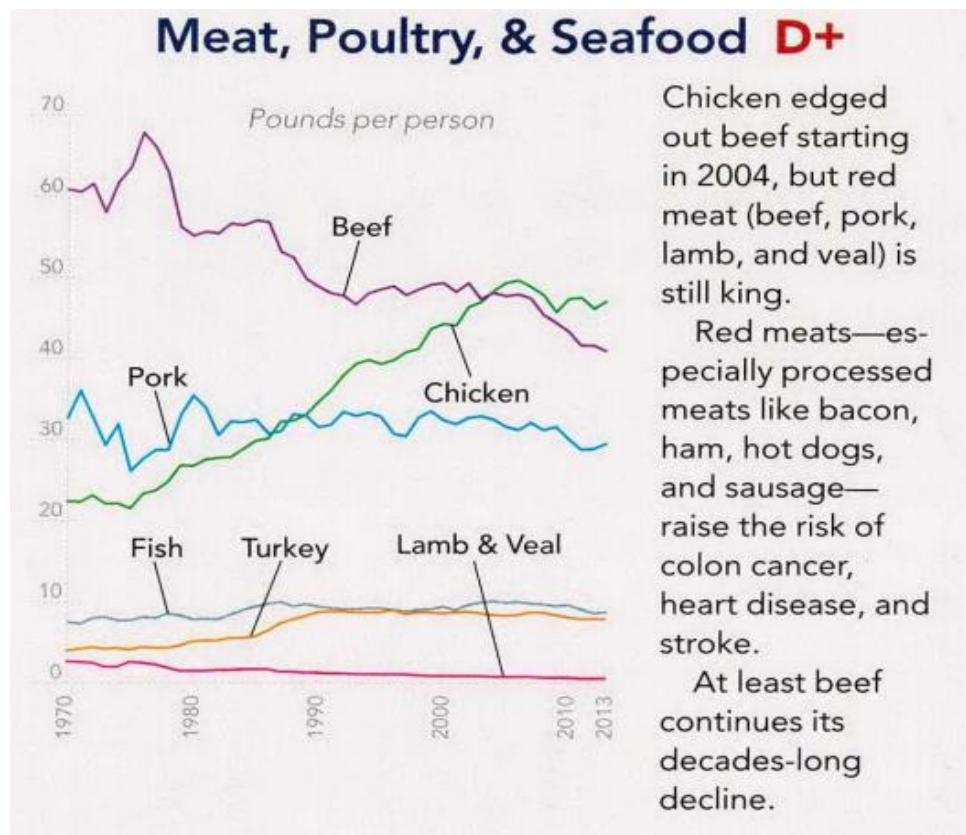
since the late 1980s. With easier access to unhealthy and ready-to-eat foods, it is more common for the majority of people to choose convenience over health. According to a study conducted on the effects of eating fruits and vegetables through self-regulation strategies compared to those who had no self-regulation strategies by Stadler (2010), those who participated in the self-regulation training of willingly eating greater amounts of fruits and vegetables were more likely to experience a healthier and more effective long-term behavior change. Unfortunately, many Americans do not possess the strategies that were presented to the group that benefited the most from the study.



Liebman, B. (2016). The changing American diet. *Nutrition Action Health Letter*, 43(8), 8-9.



Many of the foods consumed by Americans contain grains in some form. It is recommended by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) (2017) that about one-fourth of a meal should contain grains, half of which should be whole grains. Grains can be divided into two categories, whole grains and refined grains (USDA, 2017). Whole grains contain the entire grains kernel, which include the bran, germ, and endosperm, while refined grains have the bran and germ removed to improve their shelf life (USDA, 2017). Although certain vitamins may be added back into the refined grains after processing, fiber is not added back to the grains (USDA, 2017). According to Liebman (2016), although Americans should be opting for the healthier option of whole grains, consumption of grains overall needs to be reduced.



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Proteins are very important parts of meals and can be obtained from consuming certain meats, beans, soy, and many other choices. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (2017), most Americans eat more than enough from this category, which should only make up one-fourth of a meal, but need to make the leaner and more varied selections from this food group. Liebman (2016) also stated in her report with the added graphic that unhealthy selections of meat, such as red meat and processed meat, are rather popular within the American population. In order to improve the health of Americans overall, the amount of proteins consumed needs to be maintained, but healthier options need to be chosen to lessen the risk of disease in the future.

The dairy group is the final component of the ideal balanced diet. Milk is the most common selection from this group, and products made from milk that retain their calcium are also considered to be a part of this group (USDA, 2017). Since fat-free and low-fat options are available for many dairy products, consumers should choose these healthier options. Lactose-free products that still have similar calcium values are also available for those who are lactose intolerant. According to the graphic provided in a report by Liebman (2016), milk consumption has been relatively stable the last several years after decreasing prior to the 2000s. Even if milk is not the primary source of calcium intake for most Americans, the various other dairy products that are available with differing nutritional values should allow individuals to make selections that are more beneficial to themselves.

Health should be a primary concern to Americans to prevent future complications and to improve overall health. Striving to eat healthier by understanding and utilizing balanced meals in everyday life is the key to promoting a better lifestyle for the population. By understanding the necessity of eating well from a young age so that good habits can be developed, cutting out

unnecessary foods and beverages containing empty calories with sugars and fats, and by increasing intake of healthier food options in all the food groups, the American population can make drastic changes that contain numerous benefits.

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