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## **Government Tackles Obesity, Part 1**

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Every third adult in America is overweight. The percentage of overweight Americans increased from 25% to 33% from 1980 to 1991. The number of overweight or obese children has doubled over the past 15 years, to 1 in 10 children. Seventy percent of the overweight children 10 to 13 years old will be overweight or obese as adults. As a result, they will be at higher risk for heart disease, certain cancers, stroke, and diabetes. No wonder the government considers obesity a threat to the public health. This two-part series will discuss how the government is responding to this threat.

The Healthy Eating Index shows that 88% of Americans have diets that are poor or need improvement. Only 26% of people meet daily dietary recommendation for dairy products, and <20% meet the daily recommendation for fruits. Teenagers and people with low incomes tend to have particularly low-quality diets. Our lifestyles may be making matters worse: we eat more fast food because of time crunches, and we're less physically active because of conveniences such as cars, computers, and remote controls.

The Federal government, trying to address both problems, issued its new dietary guidelines for Americans this week. The guidelines have been updated every 5 years since they first were published in 1980. In addition to serving as guidelines for the public, federally funded nutrition programs, such as school-lunch programs, must follow these guidelines. The 2000 version, for the first time, includes sections on the moderate consumption of alcohol, on food safety, and on exercise (see Tips, below).

The guidelines reflect some compromises and even were the target of a lawsuit. The original draft, for example, recommended that Americans "limit" their sugar intake. The final version uses the word "moderate," partly in response to pressure from the food and soft-drink industries. The Grocery Manufacturers of America, representing makers of packaged foods, said that the guidelines should emphasize exercise and moderate eating habits instead of singling out specific nutrients for restriction (such as sodium and sugar, common in packaged foods). The National Cattlemen's Beef Association and the National Pork Producers Council opposed the language about saturated fat.

But the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine and other groups went even further, filing a lawsuit to block release of the guidelines. They believe that the guidelines committee is biased toward meat and dairy products because of ties to those industries through research or advisory work. The PCRM also said that the guidelines ignore the special dietary needs of minorities. Many blacks, for example, are lactose intolerant.

In any event, the guidelines are the basis of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's "food pyramid," which we've all seen. If people use the pyramid as a guide, says the government, they will be well on their way to eating better and becoming healthier.

Part II of this series will discuss how the government is becoming involved in another controversial aspect of obesity--diets for weight loss.

**Tips from the Dietary Guidelines:**

1. Aim for a healthy weight.
2. Become physically active each day.
3. Let the Food Pyramid guide your food choices.
4. Eat a variety of grains daily, especially whole grains.
5. Eat a variety of fruits and vegetables daily.
6. Keep food safe to eat.
7. Choose beverages and foods that moderate your intake of sugars.
8. Choose and prepare foods with less salt.
9. If you drink alcoholic beverages, do so in moderation.
10. Choose a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol, and moderate in total fat.

*Full text of the Dietary Guidelines: <http://www.ars.usda.gov/dgac>*