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## Health District Residents Urged to “Choose My Plate” For Healthier Eating

In the past, the catch phrase “Eat 5 to 9 a Day for Better Health” was the most commonly heard phrase regarding nutrition, but has since then been replaced. With rising obesity rates posing a major threat to Americans, the unveiling of *Choose My Plate* has become the nutrition movement across the United States.

On January 31, 2011, the Agriculture Secretary and the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services announced the release of the *2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, the Federal Government’s evidence-based nutritional guidance to promote health, reduce the risk of chronic diseases and reduce the prevalence of overweight and obesity through improved nutrition and physical activity.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), more than one-third of children and more than two-thirds of adults in the United States are overweight or obese. For this reason, the month of March has been declared National Nutrition Month. The *2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* place more emphasis on reducing calorie consumption and increasing physical activity. The guidelines encourage Americans to consume more healthy foods like vegetables, fruits, whole grains, fat-free and low-fat dairy products, and seafood. They encourage the reduced consumption of sodium, saturated and trans-fats, added sugars and refined grains.

The *Dietary Guidelines* contain some of the following recommendations to help individuals incorporate healthy habits in their every day lives:

- Enjoy your food, but eat less
- Avoid oversized portions
- Make half your plate fruits and vegetables
- Switch to fat-free or low-fat (1%) milk
- Compare sodium in foods like soup, bread and frozen meals – and choose the foods with lower numbers.
- Drink water instead of sugary drinks

*Choose My Plate* was developed as an effort to promote healthy eating to consumers through an easy, family-friendly icon. This icon is a plate, which is broken down by colors to represent the different food groups. Red signifies fruits, green signifies vegetables, orange signifies grains, purple signifies protein and blue signifies dairy.

In choosing a variety of foods, the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* suggests the following: increasing fruit and vegetable intake with a variety of dark-green vegetables, red and orange vegetables, as well as beans and peas. Consume at least half of all grains as whole grains, replacing refined grains. Increase intake of fat-free and low-fat dairy products, such as milk, yogurt, cheese, and fortified soy beverages. Choose a variety of protein foods, which includes seafood, lean meat and poultry, eggs, beans and peas, soy products, and unsalted nuts and seeds.

For women who are pregnant or may become pregnant, choose foods that are high in heme iron because it is more readily absorbed in the body, as well as additional iron sources and enhancers in

iron absorption, such as vitamin C-rich foods. Consume 400 micrograms per day of folic acid (from fortified food and/or supplements). Consume 8 to 12 ounces of seafood per week from a variety of seafood types; however, avoid tilefish, shark, swordfish and king mackerel. Also, limit white (albacore) tuna to 6 ounces per week, due to the high content of mercury.

Since most people find it hard to incorporate fruits and vegetables in their meals, the easiest way to increase consumption is by creating dishes that center on the vegetable, rather than treating them as a side dish. Also, use meats and starches to enhance the fruit or vegetable. Other helpful suggestions include: beginning each day with a piece of fruit or a glass of juice, snacking on fruits and vegetables throughout the day, adding fresh or frozen vegetables to your favorite main dishes, and including or substitute fruits in desserts.

For some parents, getting children to eat their fruits and vegetables can be extremely difficult, so the *Choose My Plate* website includes some fun, family-friendly tips for enjoying fruits and vegetables at all ages:

- Offer children a choice of fruits and vegetables for lunch
- While shopping, allow children to pick out a new fruit or vegetable to try
- Decorate plates or serving dishes with fruit and vegetable slices
- Top off a bowl of cereal with some berries; or, make a smiley face with sliced bananas for eyes, raisins for nose, and an orange slice for a mouth
- Let children decide on the dinner vegetables or what goes into salads
- Depending on the age of the child, allow the child to help you select, wash and dry, clean and cut fruit and vegetables.

While *Choose My Plate* may not be as catchy as “5 to 9 A Day”, the difference is clear; there is an option to choose a selection of colorful, highly nutritious food to serve to families. The full report of the 2010 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* is available online at <http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines>. Additional information about diet, portion size, label reading and other nutritional matters is available by visiting [www.choosemyplate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov). Further information about this or any other public health concern may be available at the Central Connecticut Health District, celebrating 15 years of service, at 860-721-2822 or online at [www.ccthd.org](http://www.ccthd.org).