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New federal dietary guidelines announced on Thursday urge Americans to drastically cut back on sugar, and for the first time have singled out teenage boys and men for eating too much meat, chicken and eggs.

Despite those warnings, the guidelines were also notable for what they did not say. While draft recommendations had suggested all Americans adopt more environmentally-sustainable eating habits by cutting back on meat, that advice was dropped from the final guidelines. And longstanding limits on dietary cholesterol were also removed, a victory for the nation’s egg producers, which have long argued that cholesterol from eggs and seafood is not a major health concern.

The dietary guidelines, issued by the Agriculture and Health and Human Services Departments, are updated every five years and were first issued in 1980. Typically, they have encouraged Americans to consume more fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean meat, and low-fat foods, while restricting intake of saturated fat, trans fats and dietary cholesterol. Though many individual consumers may not give the guidelines much thought, the recommendations have the potential to influence the diets of millions of Americans. The guidelines affect the foods chosen for the school lunch program, which feeds more than 30 million children each school day, and they help shape national food assistance programs like the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, which has eight million beneficiaries.

This year, the advice to cut back on sugar — specifically to limit added sugars to 10 percent of daily calories — may also lead to changes in food nutrition labels. This summer, the Food and Drug Administration proposed labels that would require food and beverage firms to disclose the amount of added sugar as a way to distinguish it from naturally-occurring sugar in foods. The advice to cut back on sugar echoes similar advice from the World Health Organization and other groups, which have cited evidence that lowering added sugar could reduce the risk of obesity, heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and some types of cancer.
The biggest surprise in the guidelines was the conclusion that teenage boys and men were generally consuming too much protein. As a result, the guidelines recommend that men and boys “reduce their overall intake of protein foods” such as meat, poultry and eggs and add more vegetables to their diets.

“That’s almost half the population, so that’s a big deal,” said Michael F. Jacobson, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a nutrition advocacy group in Washington.

In response to the guidelines the beef industry commended the government for encouraging lean meat consumption as part of a healthy diet. But it took issue with the suggestion that men and teenage boys were consuming too much protein.

“A significant amount of research shows that many people can lose and maintain a healthy weight, support a healthy metabolism and age more vibrantly when they consume more high-quality protein,” Dr. Richard Thorpe, a Texas cattle rancher and doctor, said in a statement on behalf of the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, an industry trade group.

Last year, an advisory committee of nutrition experts assembled by the government recommended that the dietary guidelines encourage all Americans to consume more plant-based foods and less meat to help promote environmentally sustainable eating habits. That suggestion elicited intense lobbying and criticism from the food and meat industries, leading to a congressional hearing on the topic last year. In December, Congress passed a spending bill that contained a provision calling for a review of the dietary guidelines by the National Academy of Medicine and restricting the scope of the guidelines to nutrition, which essentially eliminated the advice about following an environmentally-sustainable diet.

“That was the most controversial thing, and now it’s on the cutting-room floor,” Dr. Jacobson said.

In a news conference, Tom Vilsack, the secretary of agriculture, said that the guidelines were “fully compliant with the congressional directives” contained in the recent spending bill. “There’s been a healthy debate about these guidelines,” he said. “And I think that’s been extraordinarily helpful in allowing us to educate the public about what the guidelines are and what they are not.”

Some public health experts expressed concern that the guidelines sent a mixed message. On the one hand, the guidelines for the first time advise Americans to focus less on individual nutrients and to think more broadly about overall patterns of healthy eating, like consuming a vegetarian or Mediterranean-style diet.

At the same time, the guidelines also continue to tell people to sharply limit their intake of nutrients such as salt, sugar and saturated fat. Some of those restrictions – like the limits on sodium and saturated fat – have been challenged by new research and questioned by nutrition experts who say they’re outdated.

Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition, food studies and public health at New York University, said that she applauded the guidelines for saying that the emphasis should be on food patterns and not on individual nutrients. But she said the guidelines did not follow through on that recommendation.

“They make such a point of saying they’re talking about food patterns,” said Dr. Nestle, who was a member of the 1995 guidelines advisory committee. “But they didn’t really do it. They either caved in or they don’t understand what it means. There are lots of ways in which they’re undermining the food patterns message.”

For many years, the dietary guidelines have recommended that Americans limit their intake of dietary cholesterol to 300 milligrams a day – slightly less than the amount in two eggs – which scared many people away from egg yolks, shellfish and other cholesterol-rich foods. While the latest guidelines dropped that longstanding limit on dietary cholesterol, the panel also noted that Americans should “eat as little dietary cholesterol as possible” to lower their risk of cardiovascular disease.
The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, which advocates a vegan diet, announced that they were filing a lawsuit against the government over its decision to drop the 300-milligram cholesterol limit from the guidelines. The group said that members of the dietary guidelines advisory committee had close ties to the egg industry and that they had relied too heavily on industry-funded studies.

Another advocacy group, the Nutrition Coalition, said that other than the new cap on added sugar, the guidelines mostly continued old advice to eat more whole grains, produce and vegetable oils while cutting back on foods that contain saturated fat such as butter, whole milk and red meat.

“These dietary guidelines are virtually identical to those of the past 35 years, during which time obesity and diabetes have skyrocketed,” said Nina Teicholz, an investigative journalist and Nutrition Coalition board member. “Given the same advice, it’s not clear why we should expect different outcomes.”