A MILESTONE IN ACHIEVING A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

Since the release of the Qatar Dietary Guidelines at a two-day conference held by the Supreme Council of Health (SCH) in April 2015, the framework has offered valuable insights and guidance for healthy eating for the first time in a GCC country. We discuss different aspects and tips of the guidelines to achieve an overall healthy lifestyle.
As part of the National Health Strategy of reducing morbidity and mortality attributable to “chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in the State of Qatar,” the Dietary Guidelines aims at reducing rates of obesity and overweight, increasing rates of physical activity, and enhancing nutritional status. Moreover, the development of the Guidelines supports and fosters healthy lifestyle patterns to accomplish the objectives of health, nutrition and physical activity within fundamental building blocks. Since the 1992 International Conference on Nutrition in Rome, Italy, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) adopted the term of Dietary Guidelines through the determination of the lifestyle patterns that are associated with diet-related diseases. They can be a useful tool in educating the public in healthy eating and prevention of diet-related chronic diseases. This conference recommended that individual countries should develop simple Dietary Guidelines that are based on their specific public health concerns and relevant to people of different ages, lifestyles, and cultures. The concept of food-based Dietary Guidelines has come to light and was promoted by the SCH. These Guidelines take into consideration the sociocultural status and nutritional problems in Qatar.

Qatar has undergone a rapid change in its socio-economic situation, food consumption patterns, lifestyle and health status during the past three decades, what took place thanks in part to the sharp increase in income levels. Conversely, communicable diseases have almost diminished and diet-related chronic diseases have become the main health problems.

DEVELOPING METHODS FOR DIETARY GUIDELINES IN QATAR

Qatar faces great challenges to prevent and control several nutritional problems and diet-related chronic diseases. Two types of nutritional and health problems occur: those associated with change in lifestyle, such as obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, hypertension, cancer, dental caries, and osteoporosis and those associated with nutrient deficiencies, such as iron deficiency anemia and deficiencies of vitamin D and calcium. In addition, food-borne diseases are a problem of concern in these countries. Therefore, the need for simple Dietary Guidelines to address the burden of these diseases is urgent, especially as some of them contribute to more than 50% of total mortality in the GCC region.

In addition to the changes in food consumption patterns, other changes in lifestyle, are also apparent and include smoking and a decrease in physical activity. The increase in sedentary lifestyles is mainly due to the abundant use of cars, dependency on housemaids for home management, as well as due to spending a long time watching television and using the Internet, particularly by children, teenagers, and young people. In addition to addressing the prevention and control of the main nutritional problems and diet-related diseases in Qatar, the Guidelines are based on affordable and available foods, which are commonly consumed by the public, focusing on traditional foods. It also consider the cultural and religious background of the population in Qatar given that Islamic law is applicable here. It promotes a healthy lifestyle, especially the importance of physical activity and it is being based on current scientific and health information.

There has been a drastic change in food consumption patterns in Qatar and the region. This change includes both quantitative and qualitative change in diet. The structure of diet has shifted
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Food-borne diseases in Qatar and the region are mainly caused by bacteria, specifically salmonellosis, Hepatitis A, shigellosis, and poisoning with staphylococcus.

The Guidelines advise about eating a variety of different foods on a daily basis. The human body needs more than 40 nutrients to maintain good health and prevent disease. Therefore, increasing the variety of foods consumed is important to ensure an adequacy to intake of these nutrients in our meals, breakfast, lunch, supper, and snacks.

The Guidelines also advise that fruit and vegetables should comprise a basic part of the daily diet to maintain a healthy body. They also contend that meat, fish, and poultry are the main source of dietary balanced protein and are rich in essential nutrients, especially iron, zinc, and other vitamins. Many of the expatriates, frequently suffer from anemia, mainly iron deficiency anemia.

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Towards high-energy-density meals with more fat and added sugar in foods, more saturated fat (mostly from animal origin) and lower intake of complex carbohydrates, dietary fiber, fruit, and vegetables. For example, the total per capita energy intake exceeds 3000 kcal in all Arab Gulf countries, and the fat represents 25–35% of total energy.

Food rich in salt is highly consumed in the region. The high use of table salt, spices, and pickles, in addition to the salinity of water are contributing factors for the high intake of sodium in these countries. Among children and adolescents, the high consumption of fast foods and French fries is playing a great role in the increasing intake of sodium among these age groups. High intake of foods rich in added sugar, particularly among children and adolescents, has been reported by many studies in the region.

Although Qatar enjoys a sunny environment all year long, vitamin D deficiency is one of the main public health problems. Studies in Qatar revealed that 69% (an example), of children below sixteen years had vitamin D deficiency.

The change in dietary habits, lifestyle, and life expectancy in Qatar and the region has led to a remarkable change in disease trends. Diet-related chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease (CVD), diabetes mellitus, hypertension, obesity, cancer, dental caries, and osteoporosis have become the main health problems. Additionally, overweight and obesity have become epidemic among all age groups in Qatar, responsible for increased morbidity. Inactivity, high consumption of high-energy-density foods and long duration of watching television or using the Internet were reported as contributing factors for high prevalence of obesity.
Meat, fish, and chicken are good sources of good absorbable iron. At the same time, red meat consumption should be restricted and putting a limit to the intake of processed meat products that are rich in fat and salt such as sausages and mortadella should be exercised.

Legumes are a rich source of protein, some vitamins, minerals, and dietary fiber. Legumes include, among others, beans, lentils, cowpeas, kidney beans, lupine, green peas, and soybeans. On the other hand, unsalted and unroasted nuts such as walnuts, hazelnuts, almonds, and pine nuts, as well as seeds such as watermelon seeds, muskmelon, and sunflower are very rich sources of energy for their high fat content.

The Guidelines advises everyone to try to concentrate on foods based on whole grains especially bread, biscuits, and other bakery products. Cereal-based foods such as cakes, biscuits, and pastries, which can have high levels of added fats and sugars are not included in this recommendation and should be regarded as occasional treats only.

Milk and dairy products, which contain many essential nutrients, are important for the body and for its development. The Guidelines say that dairy products are the best source of calcium, which is vital to strengthen bones and for a healthy nervous system.

The consumption of milk and dairy products is important for building a healthy body, particularly during childhood and adolescence. For those who are allergic to milk or who are intolerant to lactose, low-fat yogurt or cheese, and other non-dairy products like hummus or broccoli are suitable substitute for milk.

Many foods and traditional dishes consumed in Qatar and the region are known for their considerable high fat content. Fat provides energy, essential fatty acids are necessary for development and fat helps in the absorption of certain vitamins. Nevertheless, moderate intakes of fat should always be maintained by selecting healthy food like olive oil instead of butter or margarine.

Overconsumption of food rich in sugar leads to an increase in energy intake, which contributes to an increase in your weight. In the same vein, the Guidelines suggest that teeth be cleaned immediately after eating such foods especially among children in Qatar.

Many Qatari traditional dishes, canned, and fast foods contain high amounts of salt. Studies show that an over-intake of sodium is associated with high blood pressure, strokes, and contributes to heart attacks, heart failure, and kidney failure. The Guidelines recommend that the amount of salt does not exceed 5g per day. To achieve low intake of salt, people should consume fresh foods, foods normally processed without salt, and add low salt or avoid addition of salt to food.

The Dietary Guidelines advises about frequent intakes of water (8-12 glasses a day) and other liquids as water is an essential nutrient for life. It accounts for more than 60% of our bodies and plays important roles in digestion, absorption, and transportation of nutrients in the body, as well as for elimination of waste products and thermoregulation.

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A study by Dr. Barbara Ann Seed, former Nutrition Policies and Programs Coordinator at SCH, highlighted the SCH’s commitment to “educating the population about the relevance and importance of these principles and establishing champions to advocate for them”.

The quantity of water consumed may differ from one person to another. Factors like body size, weather, physical activity, and individual differences have an effect on the body’s need for fluids. However, intake of fluids containing added sugar
Obesity has become an epidemic in Qatar and the region during the last two decades. The more weight a person has, the more the chances of developing hypertension, cardiovascular disease, hyper-cholesterolemia, and certain kinds of cancers, osteoarthritis and other respiratory problems.

The major health objective of the Dietary Guidelines therefore is to maintain a weight that sustains a healthy life and prevent extra weight gain. The way to achieve a healthy body weight is to balance intake of food and drinks with physical activity.

The findings of the Guidelines show that inactivity is one of the main factors contributing to high prevalence of obesity in Qatar that children and adolescents have become less active. These findings correspond with studies in Arab Gulf countries indicating that a serious decline in physical activity especially among women and adults. Making physical activity a part of our daily routine and maintenance of optimum weight are two important issues for good health and both can benefit your health in different ways.

The current Dietary Guidelines are useful guides for the Qatari community to promote healthy eating and lifestyle to reduce the incidence of nutrition-related diseases among residents and nationals. The SCH pledges to revise these Guidelines periodically (every 3 to 5 years) with the change of scientific evidence and research regarding the risk factors for nutrition-related diseases.

**RESEARCH ON DIETARY GUIDELINES**

In a research paper titled “Sustainability in the Qatar national Dietary Guidelines, among the first to incorporate sustainability principles,” Dr. Barbara Ann Seed, former Nutrition Policies and Programs Coordinator at SCH, concluded that the SCH and the dietary Guidelines “task force” would determine how the population in Qatar would embrace the principles found in the Guidelines. The study also highlighted the SCH’s commitment to “educating the population about the relevance and importance of these principles and establishing champions to advocate for them”. It is noteworthy that Dr. Seed’s paper aimed to “present one of the first national Dietary Guidelines that incorporate food sustainability principles into its public health recommendations”.

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INTERVIEW - SHEIKHA DR. AL ANOUD AL-THANI

SHEIKHA DR. AL ANOUD AL-THANI GIVES US SOME INSIGHT INTO THE QATAR DIETARY GUIDELINES.

Sheikha Dr. Al Anoud Bint Mohammed Al Thani, Director of Health Promotion and Non-Communicable Diseases, Public Health Department, Supreme Council of Health, presented a detailed explanation about the Dietary Guidelines for Nutrition in the State of Qatar. Dr. Al Anoud showed the stages undergone by the project since its inception in addition to highlighting components of the Guidelines in an exclusive interview with Qatar Health.

Dr. Al Anoud has also pointed out that the Guidelines explain using pictures and illustrations of food that should be consumed as well as the quantities of each type of food, vegetables and fruits. Dr. Al Anoud noted that the guidelines also provide tips and recommendations on what foods that should be avoided or minimized. She also said that they make the provision of general advice about food associated with a healthy lifestyle.

Dr. Al Anoud also indicated that Guidelines booklet contains a copy with references and bibliography for the benefit of academics in various fields.

Qatar Health: I noticed that the shape of the paradigm is not indicative of the pyramid, which we are used to and that it is in the form of a shell.

Dr. Sheikha Al Anoud Bin Mohammed Al Thani: Yes, the Dietary Guidelines represent an integrated concept. Therefore, we have chosen the form of the “shell” in order to reflect this concept in nutrition.

Qatar Health: After the release of Qatar Dietary guidelines, in what way do Dr. Al Anoud think that these guidelines could serve in the fight against non-communicable diseases? Are you optimistic?
I am very optimistic about the successful application of these Guidelines. The guidelines are an important part of the Qatar National Nutrition and Physical Activity Action Plan.

Dr. Sheikha Al Anoud Bin Mohammed Al Thani: Yes, I am very optimistic about the successful application of these Guidelines. The guidelines are an important part of the Qatar National Nutrition and Physical Activity Action Plan for 2011-2016. We have adopted nutrition studies in Europe and the Gulf States. Additionally, we have adopted the World Health Organization Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean Guide.

Exhibiting behaviours that are consistent with the Dietary Guidelines helps in reducing risk factors for non-communicable chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancer.

The Dietary Guidelines booklet includes tips and recommendations about the importance of eating healthy foods of the six food groups and maintaining a healthy weight, in addition to reducing foods that are high in sugar, salt and fat. Regular physical activity, consuming sufficient amounts of water, ensuring the safety, cleanliness of ways to prepare foods, healthy eating and environmental conservation are all under the umbrella of the Qatar Dietary Guidelines.

Qatar Health: Dr. Al Anoud supervised the 2012 survey on Chronic Disease Risk Factor Surveillance; could you give me a note on the report? Is it annual? In other words, do you think Qatar needs an update?

Dr. Sheikha Al Anoud Bin Mohammed Al Thani: The world health survey results in the State of Qatar, held in 2006 in collaboration with the World Health Organization, showed that more than two-thirds of adults (67.8%) are either overweight or obese and more than half (56%) do not have the recommended levels of physical activity by the World Health Organization (WHO). It should be at a rate of 150 minutes per week of moderate physical activity. Additionally, 81.7% of respondents in this health survey do not consume the recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables, and 11% use tobacco daily of various types. All these factors are the main risk factors for non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

The survey results also showed that 10% of the sample also had high blood pressure and a blood lab tests showed that 10% of the sample have ill glucose pre-diabetes. Therefore, we need valid data for the formulation of health policy and monitor the tendency of these diseases in the community.

Statistics showed in 2008 in the State of Qatar that the main causes of death are external causes of death, which include accidents and injuries at work, which claim the lives of twenty people per 100,000 of population, followed by diseases of the circulatory system, causing 19.4 deaths per 100,000 of the population. Different types of tumours are the third leading cause of death and kill 120 people per 100,000 of the population.

We have tested the messages at the beginning of the National Health Strategy in 2011 on Qataris between the ages of 18-64. Data and samples were collected in a very structured way using Personal Digital Assistants (PDA) for the first time in the Gulf.

There are also other non-Qatari surveys such as the survey on food consumption. Such surveys are due every five years. The next survey will be conducted in 2016-2017.

Qatar Health: “It’s an epidemic in Qatar,” you explained regarding the implication of diabetes and its association with non-communicable diseases “among the five major causes of death in Qatar”. You also said, “Injuries are the first cause of mortality, then chronic cardiac disease, then cancer, then endocrine diseases, especially diabetes”. Have you noted any improvements in people’s awareness since then?

Dr. Sheikha Al Anoud Bin Mohammed Al Thani: Of course, we have improved the awareness of individuals, Qataris and non-Qataris, regarding diabetes. However, some individuals lacked the extent and method of preventing this disease. The Qatar Dietary Guidelines were built on Aspetar’s Sports Guidelines, among several others. The Qatar Dietary Guidelines also contain their own directory for exercise.

Qatar Health: Dr. Al Anoud delivered a speech - “An Overview of the Qatar Dietary Guidelines” during the conference on Qatar Dietary Guidelines held on 8-9 April, what is your conclusion regarding the guidelines mechanism and modus operandi?

Dr. Sheikha Al Anoud Bin Mohammed Al Thani: The Qatar Dietary Guidelines represent an integrated mechanism and a clear plan during a year, which includes workshops, media coverage, question-and-answer sessions, and test samples and questionnaires and surveys in the gathering places such as mosques.

The Qatar Dietary Guidelines have been taught to university students and integrated in their curricula. With the launch of the first faculty of medicine Qatar Dietary Guidelines will have the greatest impact in the community.