

NATIONAL NUTRITION WEEK 9 – 15 OCTOBER 2012 HEALTHY EATING CHOICES FOR A HEALTHIER NATION

With a growing number of South Africans at risk of diet-related non-communicable diseases, National Nutrition Week 2012 which runs from 9-15 October, will drive awareness that healthy eating is a key component of a healthy lifestyle.

People will also be encouraged to use the newly developed *Food Guide* and the recently updated *Guidelines for Healthy Eating* to learn more about the best choices for their healthy eating plans.

All activities during National Nutrition Week 2012 will focus on communicating that:

- The Food Guide reminds people to make food choices that encourage healthy eating plans,
- The food groups are illustrated in different sized circles to remind users that **plenty** of food should be used from some groups, while others are eaten sparingly, and
- The amount of food a person needs from each of the food groups varies, depending on their age, gender and level of activity.

Now in its 14th year, National Nutrition Week has been planned jointly by the Department of Health, the Association for Dietetics in South Africa (ADSA), the Consumer Goods Council of South Africa (CGCSA) and the Consumer Education Project of Milk SA (CEP).

Citing research that showed how economic development; urbanisation and modernisation in South Africa had been characterised by changes in dietary patterns and nutrient intakes which increased the risk of diet-related non-communicable diseases, Lynn Moeng Director of Nutrition at the Department of Health, indicated that it was possible to make healthy choices even with limited resources. "The importance of going back to basics where food was produced and processed by households themselves can never be over-emphasised," she said.

"National Nutrition Week 2012 is a great opportunity to raise awareness of this crucial issue as well as an opportunity to support the community by providing science-based nutrition information in a format that is easy to understand and easy to apply in their everyday lives."

The *Guidelines for Healthy Eating* were recently reviewed and updated by nutrition experts and nutrition communication experts in line with new scientific evidence and together with the inaugural *Food Guide*, would provide people with helpful resources to follow healthy eating plans using a variety of foods, Moeng added.

The guidelines are food-based instead of nutrient-based and were developed using an evaluation of food availability as well as compatibility with the country's cultural food intake patterns. Both publications have undergone extensive consumer testing.

Yolandé van der Riet from the Food Safety Initiative (FSI) division at the CGCSA said the new *Food Guide* was particularly exciting as it had been developed specifically for South Africa to represent foods which were most commonly eaten. "It provides a simple, practical visual tool which people can use every day," she said.

National Nutrition Week 2012 will also play a key role in creating awareness that healthy eating contributes to the prevention and management of diet-related non-communicable diseases.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), unhealthy diets and physical inactivity are among the leading causes of the major non-communicable diseases including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and certain types of cancer – with scientific evidence highlighting some of the specific risk areas in South Africa.

“For example, a risk assessment conducted by the South African Medical Research Council (MRC) indicated there has been a significant increase in deaths caused by Chronic Diseases of Lifestyle (CDL) with poor eating habits also evident in the growing challenge of overweight or obese adults and children,” said Berna Harmse, ADSA President.

“The 2007 report of the South African Comparative Risk Assessment that was conducted by the MRC also revealed that over 50% of South African adult females and 17% of children aged 1 – 9 years are overweight or obese. Almost 8 million South Africans aged 30 years and older carry a risk for a chronic lifestyle disease because of high cholesterol and 5.5% of adults 30 years and older have diabetes – all of these risks increase with age.”

Maretha Vermaak, a CEP dietitian, said eating patterns had changed in recent years with greater consumption of more processed foods as well as those foods that contained less fibre, more saturated fat and more salt. “The fact that a quarter of the adult population in South Africa has risk factors for high blood pressure – obesity, excessive alcohol consumption and a high salt (sodium) and low vegetable, bean and milk intake - is another example of the country’s health challenges,” she said.

“To address these, National Nutrition Week 2012 will focus on encouraging all South Africans to use the updated *Guidelines for Healthy Eating* and the *Food Guide* to make healthy food choices, to choose foods that provide essential nutrients and to eat a variety of foods from each of the primary food groups, in the correct quantities and according to their needs.”

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