Conclusions

American diets have a long way to go before reaching generally accepted recommendations to reduce total fat, saturated fat, and sodium and to increase complex carbohydrates and fiber. Additionally, iron and calcium have been identified as problem nutrients for some age and gender groups. Some people believe that nutritional guidance should start early in life for the greatest long-term health impacts. Dietary improvement requires great effort and progress comes only gradually.

Dining out is on an upward trend for the young and old alike. There is some concern that this trend will lessen our control over what we and our children eat, how it is prepared, and subsequently, the nutrient quality of our diets.

Data from USDA's 1989-91 Continuing Survey of Food Intakes by Individuals and the companion Diet and Health Knowledge Survey provided the basis for this report. The major findings of this study are:

- Children's diets were high in total fat, saturated fat, and sodium and low in food energy and fiber. The share of calories from total fat and saturated fat was fairly consistent among children across age and gender, averaging 34 percent for total fat and 13 percent for saturated fat, which are 4 and 3 percentage points above the recommended levels. Children consumed an average of 2,948 milligrams of sodium per day (excluding salt added at the table), which is 23 percent above the recommended 2,400 milligrams by some health authorities. Since fat and sodium are key ingredients in determining the taste and/or texture of foods, reducing fat and sodium intake in American diets requires great effort.

- Female adolescents' diets were high in total fat, saturated fat, and sodium. In addition, only a small fraction of female adolescents met the recommended intakes for calcium, dietary fiber, and iron. The National Academy of Sciences recommends a relatively high allowance of calcium for teenage girls—1,200 mg per day—because peak bone mass develops during the teenage and young adult period.

- The shortcomings in the female adolescents' diets may be related to their eating patterns. Compared with other children, female teens had the highest tendency to skip morning meals (high in iron and calcium), ate the fewest meals and snacks, had the largest proportion of meals and snacks away from home (low in fiber, iron, and calcium), and drank the least fluid milk.

- Compared with home foods, higher levels of total fat and saturated fat and lower levels of cholesterol, dietary fiber, calcium, iron, and sodium were found in away-from-home foods eaten by children.

- During the 1989-91 period, foods prepared at schools were higher in fat, fiber, and calcium and lower in cholesterol, iron, and sodium when compared with home foods. Similar results were obtained in a 1993 USDA-sponsored assessment of the nutrient quality of school meals. Consequently, USDA began working on an initative to improve school meals in 1993. To show support for USDA, the Congress passed the Healthy Meals for Healthy Americans Act of 1994 (Public Law 103-448) requiring that meals served under the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program meet the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* by July 1, 1996. In June 1994, USDA launched the School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children, a comprehensive approach to turning Congress' mandate into a successful program. The Initiative includes both actions to support State and local food service organizations in improving school meals and a broad-based nutrition promotion program to increase the popularity of school meals and encourage children to improve their overall diets.