

RECOMMENDED DIETARY ALLOWANCES

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The Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDA) are guides for planning food supplies. This is clearly defined in the most recent Food and Nutrition Board publication on this subject. The RDA's represent the best estimate by a committee of experts of an allowance for nutrients which will meet the needs of virtually the entire population. It is generally perceived that the RDA is the average requirement plus two standard deviations. This is an ideal rarely achieved since we do not have adequate data on nutrient requirements or variability around requirements to permit such precise estimates. The available information for nutrients such as protein, thiamin and riboflavin, indicate a coefficient of variability of 15%-30%, thus, requirements for individuals will not vary by orders of magnitude.

The RDA's are revised about every four years. The most recent revision shows some changes, which, for the most part, are rather small. Of particular significance is the inclusion of "safe and adequate" levels of intake for a number of nutrients. Data on requirements for these nutrients are inadequate to permit the establishment of recommended allowances. The "safe and adequate" values are presented as a range. Generally the lower value represents an intake level which appears adequate to meet needs while the higher value represents the upper end of the safe range of intake. These values should not be construed as RDA's. Further, the midpoint of these ranges is clearly not to be taken as an RDA.

The appropriate use of RDA's necessitates recognition that the values are not requirements and failure to ingest the RDA level of a nutrient does not imply a deficiency of that nutrient. Often times values equivalent to two-thirds or three-fourths of the RDA are used as standards to evaluate individual intakes. It should be recognized that this is an arbitrary value and does not represent a "requirement."

The RDA's are useful guides, but care should be exercised to avoid their misuse.