

The USDA Food Guide Pyramid: New and Improved?

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On Tuesday, April 19, 2005 the USDA released its new food guidance system based on the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Out with the old Food Guide Pyramid (FGP). In with the new “MyPyramid: Steps to A Healthier You.”

For over a year, we nutrition educators waited impatiently for the new food guidance system, which was being developed behind closed doors at the USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. What would the new food guide look like? Nobody followed the old FGP because it was too general, too unrealistic. Would the new approach truly help people put the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans into practice? Would this really help solve the growing problems of obesity and poor nutrition and fitness?

Go to the website www.MyPyramid.gov to find out how to plan daily meals and snacks for you and your family.



Personalized just for YOU

According to the USDA, the new MyPyramid “symbolizes a personalized approach to healthy eating and physical activity.” This is the key difference to this new Pyramid.

Food is still categorized into food groups. Each of the triangles in the pyramid represents a food group. From left to right ... grains, vegetables, fruits, oils, milk, meat & beans. But how much of each food group YOU should eat depends on your age, gender and activity level ... basically, how many calories you need for a healthy weight. Twelve calorie levels are included for males and females ages 2-76+, with activity levels of sedentary, moderately active and active.

Here’s a little information describing the concepts behind the new pyramid and to help you navigate the new MyPyramid. The next few issues of *H&G News* will have more details on each of the food groups.

Activity

The person climbing the steps on the MyPyramid represents YOU being active. For the first time, USDA Food Guidance includes recommendations for physical activity. This is in response to the increase in couch potato syndrome – or sedentary lifestyles – in America. Recommendations are to include at least 30 minutes of exercise on most days of the week (above and beyond normal daily activity unless your job includes lots of vigorous physical activity) to lower your risks of diseases such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes and cancer. To manage your weight and prevent unhealthy

weight gain you need up to 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity on most days of the week. If you need to lose weight or keep the weight off, they recommend 90 minutes of modest exercise every day. Whew. I'm tired just writing about it!

For many people, this will require increased motivation and a major shift in schedules. But physical activity does make you feel better, both physically and mentally, and usually helps you look better. You don't need to join a gym, but for some people, that commitment works really well. Walking is some of the best exercise. (Get good walking shoes.) Gardening is great exercise. (So is cleaning house, but not nearly as much fun.) Swimming is good for people with arthritis. Now if only we had a two hour lunch.....

Moderation

Notice that the food group triangles that make up the MyPyramid are wider at the bottom and get narrower as they go up to the tip of the pyramid. The wider base represents foods with little or no solid fats or added sugar. It is wider to show that you should choose these foods more often. The narrow top area represents foods within each group that contain more added sugars and solid fats. The more active you are, you can fit more of these foods into your daily food choices.

Take vegetables, for example. At the base would be plain, steamed broccoli. Moving up might be broccoli with lemon juice and olive oil, then broccoli with cheese sauce, finally deep fried, breaded broccoli with cheese sauce. For grains, how about cooked plain oatmeal, then sweetened instant oatmeal with raisins, oatmeal cookies, and at the top, oatmeal cookies with chocolate chips and frosting! Get the picture?

Proportionality

This is represented by the different widths of the food group bands. The widest band is grains, then vegetables and milk. Fruit is wider than meat & beans. Oils are in the skinniest band. The widths suggest how much food a person should choose from each food group. These are just a general guide. How much from each food group YOU need depends, again, on your calorie needs which depend on your age, gender and activity level. Generally, for a 2000 calorie diet (sedentary boys ages 13-14, moderately active teenage girls, sedentary young women, moderately active adult women and sedentary elderly men) the daily recommendations are:

Grains	6 ounce-equivalents (one ounce equivalent = 1 slice of bread, ½ cup cooked pasta or rice, 1 ounce cold cereal, ½ bagel) 3 of which should be whole grain.
Vegetables	2 ½ cups
Fruits	2 cups

Milk	3 cups (includes milk, yogurt, cheese...choose low fat or fat free dairy products)
Meat & Beans	5.5 ounce-equivalents (one ounce equivalent = 1 ounce of lean meat, poultry, or fish – 3 ounces is about the size of a deck of cards or the palm of your hand; 1 egg; 1 Tablespoon peanut butter, ¼ cup cooked dry beans or ¼ cup nuts or seeds.)
Oils	6 teaspoons (includes salad dressings, mayonnaise, oil used in cooking, and foods naturally high in oil like oily fish, olives, avocados and nuts.)

Variety

The MyPyramid includes 6 bands representing the 5 food groups and oils. This is to show that foods from all groups are needed each day for good health. Each food group makes a distinct contribution to meeting your nutritional needs. All are needed. Oils are included for the first time because research shows that vegetable oils and oils in some fish contain fatty acids that are important for health.

Gradual Improvement

Thankfully, the USDA recognizes that no one can make the changes in their diet and activity patterns overnight in order to follow their MyPyramid recommendations. One small step at a time...steps to a healthier you...can be important to making great improvements in your health.

Make it work for YOU

- If you have access to the Internet, go to www.MyPyramid.gov.
- Find your calorie level by filling in your age, gender (male or female) and activity level.
- You will then see how much of each of the food groups are recommended for you to eat.
- Find meal patterns, menu suggestions and work sheets you can print out.
- Then take a look at what you are eating now. Write down what you eat for a few days. Count the numbers of servings, or cups, or ounces from each food group. What changes do you need to make? Are you eating whole grains? Do you eat enough vegetables or fruit? (Not counting French fries.) Are you active enough for a healthy life?
- Make one positive change. Keep it up.