

FOOD PYRAMIDS: What Should You Really Eat

INTRODUCTION

More than a decade and a half ago, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) created a powerful and enduring icon: the Food Guide Pyramid. This simple illustration conveyed in a flash what the USDA said were the elements of a healthy diet. The Pyramid was taught in schools, appeared in countless media articles and brochures, and was plastered on cereal boxes and food labels.

Tragically, the information embodied in this pyramid didn't point the way to healthy eating. Why not? Its blueprint was based on shaky scientific evidence, and it barely changed over the years to reflect major advances in our understanding of the connection between diet and health.

With much fanfare, in 2005, the USDA retired the old Food Guide Pyramid and replaced it with MyPyramid, a new symbol and "interactive food guidance system." The new symbol is basically the old Pyramid turned on its side.

The good news is that this dismantles and buries the flawed Pyramid. The bad news is that the new symbol doesn't convey enough information to help you make informed choices about your diet and long-term health. And it continues to recommend foods that aren't essential to good health, and may even be detrimental in the quantities included in MyPyramid.

As an alternative to the USDA's flawed pyramid, faculty members at the Harvard School of Public Health built the Healthy Eating Pyramid. It resembles the USDA's in shape only. The Healthy Eating Pyramid takes into consideration, and puts into perspective, the wealth of research conducted during the last 15 years that has reshaped the definition of healthy eating.

PYRAMID BUILDING

In the children's book *Who Built the Pyramid?*¹, different people take credit for building the once-grand pyramid of Senwosret. King Senwosret, of course, claims the honor. But so does his architect, the quarry master, the stonecutters, slaves, and the boys who carried water to the workers.

The USDA's MyPyramid also had many builders. Some are obvious—USDA scientists, nutrition experts, staff members, and consultants. Others aren't. Intense lobbying efforts from a variety of food industries also helped shape the pyramid.

1. Hooper M, Heighway-Bury R. *Who Built the Pyramid?* Cambridge, Mass.: Candlewick Press, 2001.

HEALTHY EATING PYRAMID

If the only goal of MyPyramid is to give us the best possible advice for healthy eating, then it should be grounded in the evidence and be independent of business.

Instead of waiting for this to happen, nutrition experts from the Harvard School of Public Health created the Healthy Eating Pyramid, and updated it in 2008. The Healthy Eating Pyramid is based on the best available scientific evidence about the links between diet and health. This new pyramid fixes fundamental flaws in the USDA pyramid and offers sound information to help people make better choices about what to eat.

The Healthy Eating Pyramid sits on a foundation of daily exercise and weight control. Why? These two related elements strongly influence your chances of staying healthy. They also affect what you eat and how your food affects you.

THE HEALTHY EATING PYRAMID

by the HARVARD SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENT OF NUTRITION

Harvard University Dining Services aligns its meal offerings with the Healthy Eating Pyramid, which was developed by the Harvard's School of Public Health (HSPH) Department of Nutrition based on their research and science. Why this and not the U.S. government's Food Pyramid? The government food pyramid, while well intentioned, is flawed at actually showing people what makes up a healthy diet because it is based on out-of-date science and influenced by people with business interests in their messages.

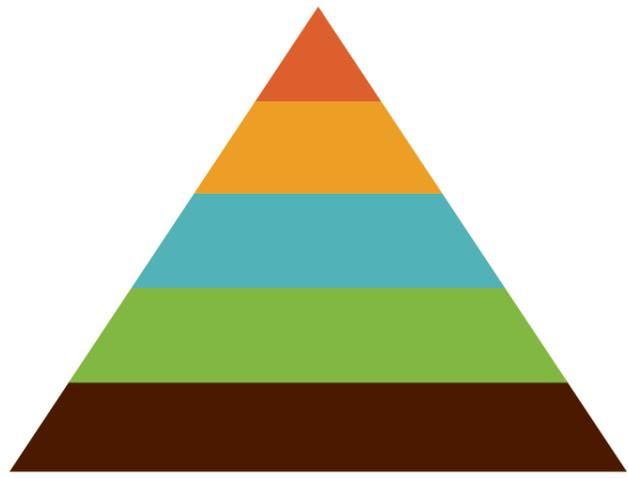
The HSPH Healthy Eating Pyramid says: construct a baseline of regular exercise and controlled portions; then fill your plate with fresh vegetables and fruits, whole grain carbohydrates, and healthy fats and oils; and eat less red meat, refined grains, and sugary drinks.

FORGET ABOUT NUMBERS & FOCUS ON QUALITY

You'll notice that the Healthy Eating Pyramid does not give specific advice about the numbers of cups or ounces to have each day of specific foods. That's because it's not meant to be a rigid road map, and the amounts can vary depending on your body size and physical activity. It's a simple, general, flexible guide to how you should eat when you eat.

There's just one basic guideline to remember: A healthy diet includes more foods from the base of the pyramid than from the higher levels of the pyramid. Perhaps the only foods that are truly off-limits are foods that contain trans fat from partially hydrogenated oils. Luckily, in the U.S. and Canada, trans fats must be listed on nutrition labels – and are eliminated from the HUDS menu.





THE HEALTHY EATING PYRAMID

BRICK BY BRICK

START WITH EXERCISE

A healthy diet is built on a base of regular exercise, which keeps calories in balance and weight in check. Be physically active. Any activity is better than none. And more is usually better.



To learn more about the Healthy Eating Pyramid, explore the “bricks” at “The Nutrition Source” online: www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/index.html

WHOLE GRAINS Good Carbs Guide the Way

The body needs carbohydrates mainly for energy. The best sources of carbohydrates are whole grains such as oatmeal, whole wheat bread, and brown rice. They deliver the outer (bran) and inner (germ) layers along with energy-rich starch. The body can't digest whole grains as quickly as it can highly processed carbohydrates such as white flour. This keeps blood sugar and insulin levels from rising, then falling, too quickly. Better control of blood sugar and insulin can keep hunger at bay and may prevent the development of type 2 diabetes. Plus, a growing body of research suggests that eating a diet rich in whole grains may also protect against heart disease.

FATS & CHOLESTEROL Out with the Bad, In with the Good

Surprised that the Healthy Eating Pyramid puts some fats near the base, indicating they are okay to eat? Although this recommendation seems to go against conventional wisdom, it's exactly in line with the evidence and with common eating habits. The average American gets one-third or more of his or her daily calories from fats, so placing them near the foundation of the pyramid makes sense. Note, though, that it specifically mentions healthy fats and oils, not all types of fat. Good sources of healthy unsaturated fats include olive, canola, soy, corn, sunflower, peanut, and other vegetable oils, trans fat-free margarines, nuts, seeds, avocados, and fatty fish such as salmon. These healthy fats not only improve cholesterol levels (when eaten in place of highly processed carbohydrates) but can also protect the heart from sudden and potentially deadly rhythm problems.

VEGETABLES & FRUITS Get Plenty Every Day

A diet rich in vegetables and fruits has bountiful benefits. Among them: It can decrease the chances of having a heart attack or stroke; possibly protect against some types of cancers; lower blood pressure; help you avoid the painful intestinal ailment called diverticulitis; guard against cataract and macular degeneration, the major causes of vision loss among people over age 65; and add variety to your diet and wake up your palate.

NUTS, SEEDS, BEANS, & TOFU

These plant foods are excellent sources of protein, fiber, vitamins, and minerals. Beans include black beans, navy beans, garbanzos, lentils, and other beans that are usually sold dried. Many kinds of nuts contain healthy fats, and packages of some varieties (almonds, walnuts, pecans, peanuts, hazelnuts, and pistachios) can now even carry a label saying they're good for your heart.

FISH, POULTRY, & EGGS Moving Closer to Center Stage

These foods are also important sources of protein. A wealth of research suggests that eating fish can reduce the risk of heart disease, since fish is rich in heart-healthy omega-3 fats. Chicken and turkey are also good sources of protein and can be low in saturated fat. Eggs, which have long been demonized because they contain fairly high levels of cholesterol, aren't as bad as they've been cracked up to be. In fact, an egg is a much better breakfast than a doughnut cooked in an oil rich in trans fats or a bagel made from refined flour. People with diabetes or heart disease, however, should limit their egg yolk consumption to no more than 3 a week. But egg whites are very high in protein and are a fine substitute for whole eggs in omelets and baking.

DAIRY (1 to 2 servings per day) or VITAMIN D/CALCIUM SUPPLEMENTS

Building bone and keeping it strong takes calcium, vitamin D, exercise, and a whole lot more. Dairy products have traditionally been Americans' main source of calcium and, through fortification, vitamin D. But most people need at least 1,000 IU of vitamin D per day, far more than the 100 IU supplied by a glass of fortified milk. And there are other healthier ways to get calcium than from milk and cheese, which can contain a lot of saturated fat. Three glasses of whole milk, for example, contains as much saturated fat as 13 strips of cooked bacon. If you enjoy dairy foods, try to stick mainly with no-fat or low-fat products. If you don't like dairy products, taking a vitamin D and calcium supplement offers an easy and inexpensive way to meet your daily vitamin D and calcium needs.

MULTIVITAMIN WITH EXTRA VITAMIN D (For Most People)

A daily multivitamin, multimineral supplement offers a kind of nutritional backup, especially when it includes some extra vitamin D. While a multivitamin can't in any way replace healthy eating, or make up for unhealthy eating, it can fill in the nutrient holes that may sometimes affect even the most careful eaters. You don't need an expensive name-brand or designer vitamin. A standard, store-brand, RDA-level one is fine for most nutrients—except vitamin D. In addition to its bone-health benefits, there's growing evidence that getting some extra vitamin D can help lower the risk of colon and breast cancer. Aim for getting at least 1,000 IU of vitamin D per day; multiple vitamins are now available with this amount. (Many people, especially those who spend the winter in the northern U.S. or have darker skin, will need extra vitamin D, often a total of 3,000 to 4,000 IU per day, to bring their blood levels up to an adequate range. If you are unsure, ask your physician to check your blood level.) Look for a multivitamin that meets the requirements of the USP (U.S. Pharmacopeia), an organization that sets standards for drugs and supplements.

USE SPARINGLY: Red Meat & Butter

These sit at the top of the Healthy Eating Pyramid because they contain lots of saturated fat. Eating a lot of red meat may also increase your risk of colon cancer. If you eat red meat every day, switching to fish, chicken, or beans several times a week can improve cholesterol levels. So can switching from butter to olive oil. And eating fish has other benefits for the heart.

Refined Grains (White Bread, Rice, Pasta); Potatoes; Sugary Drinks & Sweets; Salt

Why are these all-American staples at the top, rather than the bottom, of the Healthy Eating Pyramid? White bread, white rice, white pasta, other refined grains, potatoes, sugary drinks, and sweets can cause fast and furious increases in blood sugar that can lead to weight gain, diabetes, heart disease, and other chronic disorders. Whole grain carbohydrates cause slower, steadier increases in blood sugar that don't overwhelm the body's ability to handle carbohydrates. The salt shaker is a new addition to the “Use Sparingly” tip of the Healthy Eating Pyramid, one that's based on extensive research linking high-sodium diets to increased risk of heart attack and stroke.