Building a Better Food Pyramid

_The best food pyramid may be the one you build yourself._

**THE NEWS**

Ever since the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) developed the Food Guide Pyramid in 1992 (see illustration below), other groups have been trying to topple it. In the last decade, at least nine variations on the original pyramid have cropped up, each claiming to improve upon the USDA’s dietary advice. Now there are food pyramids that emphasize Mediterranean, Californian, vegetarian, Asian, and Latin American diets, along with others that focus on the glycemic index, weight control, and the nutritional needs of people older than 70. The latest to join the pyramid bandwagon is the “Healthy Eating Pyramid,” developed by Walter Willett, MD, of the Harvard School of Public Health. This proliferation of pyramids has created controversy among nutritionists and confusion among consumers.

Much of the debate centers around how the government’s original pyramid was developed. Some critics claim that agricultural interest groups, such as the dairy and meat industries, unduly influenced the USDA to emphasize certain foods and that the original pyramid recommends unhealthful amounts of red meat and dairy products. Others charge that the USDA’s recommendations are too broad, lumping together “good” and “bad” fats, for example, and treating all grain products as equals.

With the plethora of pyramids now available, how can consumers determine which is best?

— The Editors

**The Physician’s Perspective**

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As the wide range of food pyramids shows, there are many ways to approach good nutrition. Depending on your own cultural influences and tastes, your diet may be...
quite different from someone else’s, but each can be healthful in its own way. Instead of focusing on which version of the pyramid is right or wrong, it makes more sense to use these guidelines to provide a foundation for a healthful diet and then customize a pyramid that works for your own needs.

The USDA’s food pyramid was originally developed to replace a more general dietary guideline, which advised people simply to “eat a variety of foods.”

The problem with most Americans’ diets is not that they follow the USDA guidelines too closely, but that they eat too many foods that play a small or no part in all pyramids: sweets, high-fat snacks, and fried foods. While many meats and dairy products are high in fat and cholesterol, it’s important to recognize that small amounts of lean meat and low- or nonfat dairy products can be part of a healthful diet. For those who wish to avoid animal products, there are vegetarian alternatives, of course, but those options may not be right for everyone. It takes considerable skill to be a vegan; nonmeat eaters may find that the vegetarian pyramid provides useful guidance for achieving a balanced diet.

What studies show is that the major missing ingredients in American diets are fruits and vegetables, a core component of virtually all the pyramids. According to recent evidence, three-quarters of Americans don’t eat the recommended five servings of fruits and vegetables daily (see HN, December 2001). And these recommendations are really just minimum guidelines. Data from the ongoing DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) study suggest that eating as many as 10 daily servings of fruits and vegetables is even better. While that goal may seem difficult, tacking on even a few additional servings of fruits and vegetables provides a big health benefit — especially if those servings replace other, less healthful treats.
Remember, too, that a large apple or orange often represents two servings.

Unfortunately, for many people, french fries are one of the few vegetables they eat on a regular basis. And while we certainly need to find ways to make vegetables more appealing to a wider audience, frying them is not the answer. Although some pyramid variations, such as the Mediterranean and Willett pyramids, give “good” fats, such as olive oil, more prominence by placing them lower in the pyramid, most of us don’t need to increase fat in our diets. A more reasonable approach is to continue to limit fat, particularly saturated and trans fats, and to use monounsaturated fats, such as olive and canola oils, when possible.

As with fruits and vegetables, most of the pyramids emphasize grains, placing them at or near the base. But some of the newer versions, such as the Willett pyramid, separate whole and refined grain products, placing whole-grain foods in a large block at the bottom and refined ones at the top, along with sweets. Rather than worrying about where your grain servings fit in the pyramid, a better strategy is to get a base of six servings of fiber-rich whole grains daily. Then you can occasionally add other grain servings, even a few refined ones. With this approach, the emphasis remains on whole grains, which provide the best nutritional value, but refined carbohydrates, such as those in pasta and potatoes, aren’t completely forbidden.

Another area of pyramid controversy revolves around where to place the various protein-rich foods: red meat, poultry, fish, eggs, legumes, nuts, and seeds. A
frequent criticism of the USDA pyramid is that it lumps together all protein sources — both animal and plant — and treats them equally. Many of the newer pyramid variations shift the emphasis toward plant proteins, such as legumes and nuts, placing them lower in the pyramid, while moving poultry, fish, and eggs further up, and shifting red meat to the “use sparingly” category at the top. Although many studies show that nuts have previously unrecognized heart-health benefits, they are expensive, and it’s easy to overindulge in these tasty but high-fat foods. Similarly, fresh fish is expensive and may be difficult for budget-conscious people to include in their diets on a regular basis. Rather than singling out particular protein sources, you should instead choose lean varieties of meats and poultry, limit portion sizes, and consider adding fish and plant proteins — such as those in beans, soy, and nuts — when you can.

In the end, the best way to find a pyramid that works for you is to build your own. Take note of the recommendation from the over-70 pyramid to drink plenty of water — this is a very important “food” choice for everyone. Then shore up your diet’s base with lots of whole grains, fruits, and vegetables and add protein and dairy servings in moderation. The best way to stick to your nutritional goals is to find a structure that works for your own lifestyle.

For more information:

- The USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion’s website ([www.usda.gov/cnpp](http://www.usda.gov/cnpp)) offers an interactive Healthy Eating Index that lets you track your own dietary intake and create a food pyramid based on what you actually eat.

- Oldways Preservation & Exchange Trust produces the Mediterranean, Asian, Latin American, and vegetarian diet pyramids, [www.oldwayspt.org](http://www.oldwayspt.org)

- For further information on planning a healthful diet or to find a dietitian, visit the American Dietetic Association’s website, [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org)