

Food Pyramid Gets New Look

Exercise Component, Serving Sizes Added

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For the first time since it introduced the Food Guide Pyramid in 1992, the federal government yesterday unveiled a makeover of this well-known icon that emphasizes eating a variety of food, including healthful fat, and underscores the importance of physical activity.

Dubbed the Food Guidance System, the new pyramid sports colorful stripes for each food group from tip to base, rather than the horizontal categories of the old version. It also adds a staircase along one side as a reminder for the chronically sedentary American public to be more active to burn more calories.

The new image is based on the 2005 U.S. Dietary Guidelines, which were released in January to generally wide acclaim for boosting the importance of fruit and vegetables, whole grains and healthful fat, including nuts and olive oil, and for limiting fare with added sugar, saturated fat and trans fatty acids.

Unlike the old pyramid, the new version is interactive and for now, almost entirely a creature of the Web, a fact that drew criticism yesterday.

The Department of Agriculture, which redesigned the pyramid with the international marketing and public relations firm Porter Novelli launched the new icon on the Web site www.mypyramid.gov.

"MyPyramid is about the ability of Americans to personalize their approach when choosing a healthier lifestyle that balances nutrition and exercise," USDA Secretary Mike Johanns said. "Many Americans can dramatically improve their overall health by making modest improvements to their diets and by incorporating regular physical activity into their daily lives."

The site was so overwhelmed with users yesterday -- an estimated 5.4 million per hour, according to the USDA -- that many people were unable to access it.

A companion Web site -- mypyramidtracker.gov, which offers a database of 8,000 foods and 600 types of physical activity -- was also clogged and unavailable for most of the day. It enables users to electronically log on and keep a record of as much as a year's worth of food intake and physical activity on the Web site. Users can analyze their history by the day, the week, the month or the year to see how it stacks up against the guidelines. For those who are reluctant to register with a government site, there is also a "first look" option to check out the MyPyramid Tracker anonymously.

"The fact that almost all the information is on the Web is a lost opportunity, because only the very most motivated people will go to the Web and dig into this information more deeply," said Walter Willett, professor of nutrition and epidemiology at the Harvard School of Public Health.

The new image had been greatly anticipated since the USDA announced in September 2003 that it would begin revising the Food Guide Pyramid. While waiting for the 2005 Dietary Guidelines to be completed, the department held public hearings to consider other shapes and conducted national opinion surveys. The surveys found that about 80 percent of Americans recognized the old pyramid as a nutritional icon, but few reported using it to guide their food choices.

"People said, 'The old pyramid was nice, but it doesn't fit me,' " said Eric Hentges, executive director of the USDA Center of Nutrition Policy and Promotion. The new interactive tools, Hentges said, allow users to build personalized pyramids that take into account their age, sex and level of physical activity.

But reaction to the new Food Guidance System was mixed.

"It's positive that what they released can be more personalized," said Elizabeth Pivonka, president of the Produce for Better Health Foundation, a nonprofit group that promotes greater consumption of fruit and vegetables. "And I like the way physical activity is included graphically. But from a negative side, the population most in need doesn't have access to computers, and from a big point of view they missed the opportunity to make a stronger message. . . . It's designed to not call any attention to any negative food group. I hate to say it, but what else would we expect from the USDA?"

The new Food Guidance System includes 12 intake levels, from 1,000 calories per day to 3,200 per day, designed to help consumers find the caloric balance that will help them achieve a healthier weight. The nonspecific "servings" that marked the old pyramid have now been replaced with servings listed in cups, teaspoons and ounces, the kind of common measurements used in every home in the country.

The base of the new pyramid begins on the left with whole grains and moves through a spectrum of plant-based foods, healthful plant-based oils and on to animal-based dairy, lean meat, poultry, fish and eggs. But consumers will need to click on the various colors to find more detail about their particular dietary needs.

It is that kind of extra effort that worries many nutrition experts.

"The new dietary guidelines are the best ever," said Margo G. Wootan, nutrition policy director at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a consumer advocacy group. "They're based on the latest science and they provide very strong advice, but it seems like the USDA dodged the difficult political advice once again and didn't clearly communicate what to eat less of. Given that obesity is the biggest health problem facing the country that is what is most needed to be communicated."

Others, including Alison Kretser, senior director of scientific and nutrition policy for the Grocery Manufacturers of America, said the new pyramid opens the door to more possibilities for food companies and consumers. "We now have a system," Kretser said. "Now it's our turn to promote and communicate it."