

Building a Better Pyramid- HARVARD SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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 and how you eat and how your food affects you. The other bricks of the Healthy Eating Pyramid include:



* Whole Grain Foods (at most meals). 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.

* Plant Oils. 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 plant oils, not all types of fat. Good sources of healthy unsaturated fats include olive, canola, soy, corn, sunflower, peanut, and other vegetable oils, as well as 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.(3)

* Vegetables (in abundance) and Fruits (2 to 3 times). A diet rich in fruits and vegetables can decrease the chances of having a heart attack or stroke; protect against a variety of cancers; lower blood pressure; help you avoid the painful intestinal ailment

called diverticulitis; guard against cataract and macular degeneration, the major cause of vision loss among people over age 65; and add variety to your diet and wake up your palate.

* Fish, Poultry, and Eggs (0 to 2 times). These are important sources of protein. A wealth of research suggests that eating fish can reduce the risk of heart disease. 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're 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.

* Nuts and Legumes (1 to 3 times). Nuts and legumes are excellent sources of protein, fiber, vitamins, and minerals. Legumes include black beans, navy beans, garbanzos, 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.

* Dairy or Calcium Supplement (1 to 2 times). 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. But there are other healthy 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 with no-fat or low-fat products. If you don't like dairy products, calcium supplements offer an easy and inexpensive way to get your daily calcium.

* Red Meat and Butter (Use Sparingly): These sit at the top of the Healthy Eating Pyramid because they contain lots of saturated fat. If you eat red meat every day, switching to fish or chicken several times a week can improve cholesterol levels. So can switching from butter to olive oil.

* White Rice, White Bread, Potatoes, White Pasta, Soda, and Sweets (Use Sparingly): Why are these all-American staples at the top, rather than the bottom, of the Healthy Eating Pyramid? They 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 this much needed but potentially dangerous nutrient.

* Multiple Vitamin: A daily multivitamin, multimineral supplement offers a kind of nutritional backup. While it 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. Look for one that meets the requirements of the USP (U.S. Pharmacopeia), an organization that sets standards for drugs and supplements.