

## THE MISGUIDED FOOD PYRAMID"

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As a Registered Dietitian, I am often asked to explain the "Food Guide Pyramid" published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The USDA forms committees to develop the latest nutritional guidelines in an effort to combat the ever-increasing obesity and overweight epidemic here in the U.S., by educating and communicating nutrition health messages.

In April 2005, the USDA introduced not one, but twelve new "Food Guide Pyramids" to replace the one we grew accustomed to seeing on food packaging, such as bread or cereal boxes. You may recall that this predecessor pyramid showed the "grain and cereals" group as the base, with "fat and sugars" at the top of the pyramid. While this was not a "perfect" pyramid, lacking portion size and specificity components; the pyramid did a decent job of showing proportions of food groups relative to each other.

Unfortunately, the food guide pyramids the USDA has newly introduced are more confusing, less explicit, and less useful in portraying healthy dietary recommendations to the public. Instead of developing a tool that is practical, easy to read, and understand, we now see a set of pictures, which have lost their meaning!

The new pyramid is sliced, vertically, into long, colored, rainbow-like bands, supposedly to represent the different food groups. Colors such as orange, green, and blue, are used to represent grains, vegetables, and fruit, respectively. Yet, the color scheme is irrelevant and illogical, a five year old could have taken crayons and come up with that!

If you look at the USDA's website for the new food guide pyramids at "mypyramid.gov," the first thing you see is a picture of this new rainbow pyramid. There are no labels, no explanations, and no color-key. Without these tools, the pyramid is indefinable and has no meaning. To further obscure the message of the pyramid, the breakdown of the sections are ambiguous and there is no room to explain which foods are recommended or are healthier, such as Whole grains and lean meats.

In order to obtain further information, you must input your age, sex, and activity patterns first. This information is supposedly "tailored" to you as an individual; yet, the recommendations provided are vague, do not take your height or weight into account, and are thus, grossly over generalized. For example, a 30 year old woman who exercises 60 minutes a day, is 5'0" and weighs 100 pounds may need 1500 calories each day. Whereas, a 30-year-old woman who also exercises 60 minutes a day, but is 5'9" and weighs 200 pounds may need 2400 calories each day. Yet, since the program only requires you to input your age, sex, and exercise time, both these women will receive the same recommendations! Consequently, even after providing more information to the program, it spits back rather useless generalized information. Our bodies are different sizes, and require different amounts of calories; it is not just about age.

When we have more information circulating the airwaves, and more studies showing the types of foods that are beneficial for improving health; why have nutrition messages become less lucid, and more AMBIGUOUS than before? I may not know the exact answer, but I question the intentions at play during the development of these new, poorly defined nutrition images.

Perhaps it is time that the United States take a cue from other nations. Perhaps we should stop assuming we "know it all," and look at food guides other countries developed to use as templates. The United Kingdom, for example uses a "Food Guide Circle." The circle is sectioned off, very much like a pie chart. Within each section are pictures of the typical portion of recommended and healthier foods. This pictorial is more practical in propagating a clear message.

We may be one of the wealthiest nations; but we are also one of the heaviest and least healthy and are not taking the proper steps needed to improve the status of overall health.

The one "positive" comment I can make about this pyramid is its inclusion of a staircase, a stick-figure person on the staircase, and the representation of the exercise component. However, this is a "FOOD" guide pyramid, and exercise is not food.

When it comes to the new food guide pyramid; I urge you not to spend too much time trying to decipher what, if any message it attempts to convey. Rather, try to eat as close to "nature" as possible. When shopping for meat, poultry, or fish, look for lean cuts such as sirloin and chuck, skinless chicken or turkey breasts, and fish. Shop the perimeter of your grocery store, seeking colorful, healthful, and delicious fresh fruit and vegetables. Eat non-fat and low-fat dairy products, milk, yogurt, and cheese, or substitute with low-fat soy products. Eat whole-grains such as plain oats, whole-grain bread, and brown rice. Look for frozen and low-sodium canned vegetables, or fruit that is packed in its own juices.

By following these recommendations, you will fare better than if you sit down and try understand a vague, non-sensical "drawing." Pictures are supposed to be worth a thousand words; but in the case of the twelve new food guide pyramids the government has just introduced; they collectively imply only one word in my mind that word is "NOTHING."