

[IMAGE]

## Blueprint for a Balanced Meal

By Carrie Wiatt, MS

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has replaced its "pyramid" representation of healthy eating with a plate featuring four colored sections representing fruits, vegetables, grains and proteins, along with a glass representing dairy. The plate emphasizes several important nutritional messages: eat smaller portions, make at least half the plate fruits and vegetables, and avoid sugary drinks. It's really that simple.

MyPlate, the new portion guide released early this summer, aims to teach healthy eating basics. The government converted the former USDA Food Pyramid to a portioned plate to make following dietary guidelines easier and more user-friendly for Americans. The idea of proper portion control, however, is nothing new. But if the key to healthy eating is so simple, why are two-thirds of Americans overweight or obese?

Our culture has come to be characterized by complete lack of control and confusion. Just as having too many material goods can rob each one of their value, eating too much can erode our ability to derive pleasure and satisfaction from food. Overeating works like a drug in the body: Excess energy intake stresses out your system at every level. If we are to realize our full potential and create a safe environment for our children, we must stop allowing ourselves to be victims of food pushers. We must find a new path to healthy bodies and minds.

meal blueprint - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark MyPlate reinforces this portion idea that "less is more." It emphasizes balanced serving sizes and visual portion control. Being portion savvy will teach Americans to plate their food in the kitchen, preventing huge portions and second helpings. This naturally causes mindful eating and frees up time for more fun with the family. Let's take a closer look at how this new plate differs from the original food pyramid, which included the four food groups stacked in the shape of a pyramid with the number of recommended servings a person should eat from each group in a day.

### Practical Application of the New Guidelines

MyPlate displays sections of fruits, vegetables, grains and protein, with a cup of dairy on the side. Americans have quite a few options within each food section. Some fruit choices are apples, bananas,

grapefruit, mangos, pears, pineapples, and watermelon. Vegetables include kale, squash, carrots, potatoes, cucumbers, cabbage, and asparagus. Grains include rolled oats, pastas, pretzels, tortillas, whole-wheat bread, popcorn, and barley. MyPlate lists protein choices as beef, ham, venison, chicken, nuts, cod, and tuna. The glass of dairy focuses on low-fat milk, yogurts and cheeses. (For more information, [www.choosemyplate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov) reviews specific examples and features "food galleries.")

MyPlate suggests increasing fruit and veggie intake to fill half your plate, making at least half of your daily grain intake *whole* grains, and switching to fat-free or low-fat milk. It also recommends limiting intake of sodium-filled soups, breads and frozen foods, and urges Americans to drink water instead of sugary drinks. A few other key items stand out to me:

Since fruit can be high in calories, it's important to watch portion sizes. Berries are a great choice, lowest in calories and full of antioxidants.

MyPlate considers beans as part of both the vegetable and protein portion of the plate. This highlights the fact that vegetarians consume beans as a protein choice, but more Americans should include beans in their diet. For adults, the recommended daily allowance for protein is 0.8-1.0 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight (about 80 grams for a 175-pound person). MyPlate fails to recognize other grains such as lentils, quinoa, brown rice, oatmeal, and bulgur as additional protein sources.

There is no section of fats shown on the plate. Unlike the Food Pyramid, which suggested Americans include them in their diet "sparingly," MyPlate has taken them out of the picture. Most Americans consume too much fat and with it, excess calories. It is better to emphasize healthy fats and be careful with serving sizes than to completely eliminate this group. Limit saturated fats from meats and other solid fat sources, while adding healthy fats from oils, nuts and avocados. Limit serving sizes to 1 tsp for oils, ¼th of an avocado, and a dozen nuts.

What about desserts? Low-sugar, portion-controlled desserts, such as whole fruit popsicles, ½ cup of natural sorbet, 1 ounce dark chocolate, or an individual low-fat pudding are perfectly acceptable as an occasional indulgence. Treats, in moderation, can be a part of a healthy diet.

## **Other Considerations**

Because Americans are in different life stages and may be dealing with individual illnesses and diseases, it cannot be assumed that these portions work for everyone. Obviously, a teenager and an older adult won't need the same amount of calories. The portion plate is a broad example, not to be misconstrued that "one plate fits all." Parents should keep in mind when organizing, shopping and planning meals for their families that not all portions should be equal.

ChooseMyPlate - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Two other important issues are not addressed with the new MyPlate model. First, it doesn't recognize the importance of snacks. Metabolic functions are most efficient when we eat a small meal or snack every 3-4 hours. I recommend at least two snacks a day. Good choices include a small piece of fruit with a few nuts or low-fat string cheese, or 2 teaspoons of hummus with 1 cup of carrot, celery and cucumber sticks. These snacks should also be portion controlled, at around 100-150 calories. Second, in the interest of simplicity, the exerciser climbing the pyramid has been taken out. That doesn't mean that exercise can be forgotten. Find an enjoyable exercise or activity and keep moving!

### **Less Is More, Balance Is Better**

Less is more, especially regarding healthy eating. Although there are some issues worth noting with the MyPlate model, it emphasizes basic nutrition guidelines, which too many Americans either don't know about or don't follow. It relates healthy eating with my main philosophy of portion control. Once people establish portion-savvy habits, they stress less about eating and can enjoy wellness in every aspect of their lives.

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### **Eating Right: Focus on Simple Strategies**

The USDA recommends taking these simple steps (among others) to make every meal a healthy one.

- Enjoy your food, but eat less. Avoid oversized portions.
- Make half your plate fruits and vegetables.
- Make at least half your grains whole grains.
- Switch to fat-free or low-fat (1%) milk.
- Compare sodium in foods like soup, bread, and frozen meals, and choose the foods with lower numbers.

- Drink water instead of sugary drinks.

Information provided by the United States Department of Agriculture. For more information, go to [www.choosemyplate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov).

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