

The Building Blocks of Good Nutrition: The USDA Food Guide Pyramid (*until 2005*)

The Food Guide Pyramid is an outline for Americans on what and how to eat each day to meet daily nutritional needs and achieve good health. Based on extensive research collected and evaluated by the USDA and supported by the Department of Health and Human Services, the Food Guide Pyramid was released in 1992 replacing the basic four food group pie chart that had been used since the 1950s in an effort to provide more specific guidelines for a healthful diet. The Pyramid represents the most up-to-date advice from nutrition scientists and follows the Dietary Guidelines for Americans that emphasize ways to maintain health and reduce risk of certain diseases.

Why is the Food Guide Pyramid Important?

The Food Guide Pyramid provides a visual guide and description to help Americans make healthful choices in their diets on a daily basis. It is not a strict, inflexible diet, but the Pyramid provides general guidelines based on three daily caloric levels (1,600, 2,200, 2,800) for the five major food groups plus focuses on fat and sugar since the typical American diet is too high in fat and calories. The Pyramid also provides a recommended number of servings for each of the five groups plus fats, oils and sweets.

The Parts of the Food Guide Pyramid

The Food Guide Pyramid emphasizes foods from the five major food groups and is divided into three main levels and a triangular tip. The tip of the Pyramid shows added fats, oils and sweets like butter, margarine, sugars, soda, candy, oils and other sweet desserts that add calories but provide little nutritional value to the diet. The recommendation is to *eat sparingly* those items included in the tip of the Food Guide Pyramid.

The first level of the Pyramid includes the Milk, Yogurt & Cheese Group and the Meat, Poultry, Fish, Dry Beans, Eggs & Nuts Group. This level is composed mostly of foods that come from animals, with the exception of dry beans and nuts that are rich plant sources of protein. This level is especially rich in protein, Vitamin B₁₂, calcium, iron, and zinc.

The second level of the Pyramid includes foods that come from plants: fruits and vegetables. Rich in vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and fiber, most Americans need to consume more from this level.

The third level – or base – of the Pyramid is composed of breads, cereals, rice and pasta. This base of the Pyramid includes foods that come from grains. Rich sources of carbohydrates and fiber (if they are whole grain), 6-11 servings from this group are needed each day for energy and good health.

The Five Major Food Groups of the Pyramid

Below is a table including the five major food groups, recommended servings, principal nutrients provided, and samples of single servings. This can serve as another visual reference of The Food Guide Pyramid.

	Recommended Servings	Principal Nutrients Provided	Sample Single Servings
Milk, Yogurt & Cheese	2-3	Protein, Calcium, Iron, Zinc	1 cup milk or yogurt 1.5 oz natural cheese 2 oz processed cheese
Meat, Poultry, Fish, Dry Beans, Eggs and Nuts	2-3	Protein, Iron, Vitamin B ₁₂ , Zinc	2-3 oz of cooked lean meat, poultry, or fish ½ cup cooked dry beans 2 eggs 4 Tbsp peanut butter 2/3 cup nuts
Vegetables	3-5	Vitamins, Minerals, Antioxidants, Phytochemicals, Fiber	1 cup of raw leafy vegetables ½ cup cooked or chopped vegetables ¾ cup of vegetable juice
Fruits	2-4	Vitamins, Minerals, Antioxidants, Phytochemicals, Fiber	1 medium apple, banana or orange ½ cup chopped, cooked or canned fruit ¾ cup of fruit juice
Bread, Cereal, Rice and Pasta	6-11	Fiber if whole grain, B vitamins, Carbohydrates	1 slice of bread 1 oz ready-to-eat cereal ½ cup cooked cereal, rice or pasta

How to Determine the Right Number of Servings for You.

Depending on the optimal caloric level for each individual, the number of servings appropriate will vary. For example, a 1,600-calorie diet is appropriate for many sedentary women and some older adults. Most children, teenage girls, active women and many sedentary men need an average of 2,200 calories per day. 2,800 calories are generally recommended for many teenage boys, active men and some very active women. While these are just general ranges, they provide a way to interpret the servings from the Food Guide Pyramid. For example, in the Bread, Cereal, Rice, and Pasta group, the Pyramid shows a range of 6 to 11 servings. 6-7 servings would be adequate for a 1,600-calorie diet, 8-9 servings for a 2,200-calorie diet, and 10-11 servings for a 2,800-calorie diet. The other food groups can be similarly divided.

What's a Serving?

Because there are different ideas about what constitutes a single serving or portion of a food, The Food Guide Pyramid gives measurements in weight or volume of certain foods that equal a standard single serving according to the Pyramid. The American Dietetic Association has also published a handy reference so that individuals can begin to visually recognize what a "single" serving looks like. The serving sizes are not designed to restrict the amount of any one food eaten at a meal, but provides a guideline of *how many* of the daily servings are being consumed. A few useful examples of the ADA's single serving comparisons include:

Food	Resembles:
3 oz. Lean meat, fish poultry	A deck of cards or audiocassette.
2 Tbsp Peanut butter	A ping pong ball
1 oz Cheese	A thumb or golf ball
1 medium-sized fruit or ½ cup fresh fruit	A baseball
½ cup Carrots	7 packaged, peeled baby carrots
½ medium Grapefruit	½ softball
½ cup Grapes	15 grapes

These kinds of handy references, as well as one's own creative techniques, can help individuals monitor how much they are consuming and the kind of variety of foods that is being included in the diet each day.

Why Use the Food Guide Pyramid?

Referring to the Food Guide Pyramid can be an important step in working to assure optimal nutrition for staying healthy. Each of the five food groups provides some, but not all, of the nutrients one needs everyday. No one group is more important than any other and foods in one group can not replace foods of another. For optimal health, food from every group is necessary.

The purpose of the Food Guide Pyramid is to serve as an easy-to-use guide for eating nutritiously. The recommendations are guidelines only and not a mandate to measure and count in detail every food consumed. Becoming familiar with the Food Guide Pyramid can bring increased awareness and attention about amount and variety in the diet, helping Americans work toward ensuring adequate nutrition and optimal health.

References:

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