



ASK THE DIETITIAN

MyPlate for Better Health

Q. Why did the pyramid go away after so many years?

A. Introduced in 1992 and updated in 2005, a pyramid has been used as the symbol to help the public follow the Dietary Guidelines for Americans for decades. While the pyramid focused on food groups and amounts of food that should be eaten from each group daily, it was not easy for the general public to translate this information into a meal. The new MyPlate icon builds on the familiar mealtime image - a plate - by visually encouraging consumers to prioritize food choices and build healthy meals.

Q. There are so many different diets, is this new MyPlate diet easy to follow or is this the newest fad?

A. The new MyPlate food icon is neither a fad nor a diet. The MyPlate food icon was designed as a visual reminder to help the public make healthy food choices as recommended by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. In addition to the MyPlate icon and general information about the food groups, there are many interactive tools on the ChooseMyPlate.gov website that are designed to help Americans move towards better overall health. The website tools help you to set goals for healthy choices, calculate the number of calories that's right for you, choose sample meal plans for good health, and track your meals and physical activity.

Q. I eat smaller meals and snacks throughout the day instead of three large meals, do I need to have all of the MyPlate food groups each time I eat?

A. The MyPlate place setting is a visual guide or model for healthy eating. The model is designed to encourage you to eat the recommended amount from each of the food groups. Even if your plate does not look exactly like MyPlate 100% of the time, strive to get the right balance of each food group over the course of the day. For example, to get the amount of vegetables you need, it's helpful to include salads or carrot sticks and hummus or other vegetables throughout the day. Whether you eat three main meals or smaller meals, most people rarely include enough foods from the fruit, vegetable, whole grain or dairy groups and MyPlate is a constant reminder to include them at meals, small or large, whenever possible.

Q. Where are the vegetable oils on the MyPlate place setting?

A. The old pyramid included a section for oils like olive, canola or corn. For simplicity, the MyPlate icon only includes the five *major* food groups. Research has shown that many vegetable oils can have positive effects on health. Since they are used in food preparation, and are a source of calories, enjoy them in moderation with your meals.

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Q. How do condiments fit in?

A. We all enjoy condiments like ketchup, pickles, mustard, salad dressings, mayonnaise and soy sauce. Condiments are not a food group and are therefore not pictured on the MyPlate food icon. Some condiments can be high in sodium; others contain sugars which add empty calories, so the rule of thumb for condiments is - use in moderation.

Q. How do I know which kinds of protein are the best?

A. With protein food choices, variety is the key. Animal protein like meat and poultry, and plant based proteins like soy, nuts, and beans are all included in the protein foods group. Since most Americans eat too much protein, MyPlate recommends less meat and more choices from the wide range of foods in the protein group. In addition to traditional meat and poultry entrees, make sure to include *non-meat* choices and choose seafood at least twice a week. Meatless soy products like veggie burgers and tofu are becoming more and more popular. Keep in mind that beans and peas like kidney or pinto beans, black eyed or split peas are nourishing plant protein foods that are also high in fiber.

Q. Is there a MyPlate for diabetics or people with high blood pressure?

A. If you have a medical condition such as diabetes, high blood pressure or food allergies that require treatment with a specific diet, you should talk to your doctor and a registered dietitian for details about the daily meal patterns that complement your overall treatment plan. MyPlate provides a visual image of healthy eating based on the most current dietary guidelines for Americans. The meal patterns recommended by the dietary guidelines apply to healthy people and do not take into account individuals who need diets that treat specific medical conditions.

Q. Do starchy vegetables like corn count as vegetables on the MyPlate place setting?

A. Starchy vegetables are part of the vegetable group. Starchy vegetables include potatoes, lima beans, corn and green peas. Other vegetable sub-groups include dark greens like spinach and broccoli, red and orange colored vegetables like carrots and yams, as well as the special category of beans and peas like lentils and pinto beans. Maximize the wide variety of nutrients, antioxidants and phytochemicals that you can get from different sub-groups of vegetables by choosing variety as you fill half your plate with fruits and vegetables. Visit the website ChooseMyPlate.gov to learn how many servings from each of the five sub groups are recommended weekly for a person of your age and gender. For example, the dietary guidelines recommend that 19-30 year old males eat as much as 2 cups of dark green, 6 cups of starchy, 2 cups of red & orange, 2 cups of beans & peas and 5 cups of 'other' vegetables per week.

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Q. Do I really need to drink a glass of milk at every meal or could I drink water or juice?

A. Although the blue dairy circle off to the side of the MyPlate place setting is thought of as a glass of milk, not everyone likes or can tolerate dairy products. The important nutrients in the dairy group are calcium, potassium, vitamin D and protein which are also found in many non-dairy foods like leafy green vegetables and fortified soy milk. Although calcium is essential for bone health and milk is the main source of calcium in the American diet, dairy is not necessary at every meal, especially if alternate calcium containing foods are eaten in adequate amounts. Alternate mealtime beverages should include mainly water and other unsweetened beverages. Remember that juice contains natural sugar and is technically a sweetened beverage that should be limited to one small glass a day as a fruit serving.

Q. How large is the plate?

A. Like portion sizes of food, plate sizes have also grown over the years. Many studies show that when we use larger bowls and plates, we tend to serve ourselves larger portions. The ChooseMyPlate.gov website encourages using a smaller plate as one of the ways to build a healthy meal. While the website does not specify the size of the plate, downsizing from a 12-inch to a 10-inch diameter dinner plate is a good way to enjoy your food in more appropriate portions.

Q. Where can I find more detailed information about portion sizes and calories?

A. ChooseMyPlate.gov provides detailed information about portion sizes and calories. The website includes an overview of the food groups that lists which foods belong and recommended portion sizes. In many cases, actual size pictures of food portions are displayed for use as a portion size reference. Also, the website provides sample menus and recipes. The general sample menu for a 2,000 calorie meal plan lists portion sizes for each menu item. The SuperTracker section of the website provides visitors with an opportunity to personalize. The SuperTracker enables you to calculate the number of calories that's right for you and suggests a daily food plan based on your calorie level for healthy eating.

Q. It's difficult to figure out how to fit some foods like bread onto the plate, where can I find more information?

A. Bread fits on the grain section of the plate since bread is one of many foods in the grain group. The dietary guidelines encourage you to make half the grains you eat, whole grains as they are more nutritious than refined grains. The ChooseMyPlate.gov website provides tips that make it easier to choose appropriate portions from a variety of whole grain foods like whole wheat bread, brown rice, oatmeal or whole wheat pasta.

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Q. Where do beans fit, are beans protein or vegetables?

A. Beans and peas such as black beans, lima beans and lentils are described on the ChooseMyPlate.gov website as “unique foods” since they belong in both the protein group and the vegetable group. Their protein, iron and zinc content makes them similar to meats, poultry and fish; and their high fiber, folate and potassium content makes them similar to most vegetables. If you plan a traditional meal that includes meat, poultry or fish, you can fill up the vegetable section of your plate with beans or a traditional vegetable like broccoli. If you plan a meatless meal with beans or soy, fill the vegetable section of your plate with traditional vegetables like carrots. Either way, don't forget to fill half your plate with a variety of fruits and vegetables.

Q. Does MyPlate work for kids?

A. The good thing about MyPlate is that it's a simple visual. Even though calorie amounts are different for kids, the guidance to eat healthy foods applies to kids just as it applies to grown-ups. The bold colors that divide the plate into sections for each of the major food groups make it easy to teach kids how to build a healthy plate.

Q. Is there a separate guide for snacks since they don't fit on the plate?

A. Since snacks are not eaten at mealtime they are not pictured on MyPlate, but the meal plans suggested by the dietary guidelines for Americans all include healthy snacks. Snacks should typically include nutritious whole foods such as popcorn, raisins, nuts, yogurt, carrot and celery sticks. Since many people do not eat enough fruits and vegetables, and sometimes fall short even when they make an effort to fill half the plate, snacking on them can be a great way to make sure that you're getting enough. Fruits and vegetables are smart snacks that can replace typical snacks that tend to have empty calories, added sugars or sodium.

Q. What about alcohol, where does it fit?

A. Alcohol is not included in MyPlate. Alcohol falls in the category of 'foods to reduce' since they provide mostly empty calories and alcohol can have a negative impact on people with certain health conditions. The current dietary guidelines recommend *moderation* for adults who drink alcoholic beverages. Since moderation means different things to different people, the USDA defines moderation as – up to one drink per day for women and two drinks per day for men of legal drinking age. If you take prescription medications always check with you doctor to learn if there are side effects form drinking alcoholic beverages.

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Q. I don't see a section for dessert on my plate, how do I fit dessert in?

A. For many people, a meal is not complete without dessert. Sweets and treats are OK in small quantities. Typical dessert foods like cakes, pies, cookies and ice cream are filled with added sugars and solid (saturated) fats that can add many “empty calories” to meals. Treat yourself to small amounts occasionally. These are the foods that we should eat only when there is room for additional calories, after eating the recommended amounts from the major food groups like fruits, vegetables, grains, protein and dairy. So keep portions small and choose fruit for dessert as often as possible.

Q. How do soups, stews and other mixed dishes fit into MyPlate?

A. So much of what we eat is a mix of ingredients from different food groups. Chilies and stews for example are filled with protein like meat or beans, and vegetables like carrots or potatoes. Mixed dishes are a great way to get to your MyPlate goals to increase the amount of whole grains and vegetables. Look for mixed dishes with whole grains like brown rice or barley and a wide variety of vegetables. Soups and stews fit perfectly with the guidance that MyPlate offers, just keep in mind that by the end of the day you should get enough from each of the major food groups.

Q. Fruits and vegetables on half my plate? That does not seem too realistic for most people!

A. The dietary guidelines recommend filling half your plate with fruits and vegetables as a way to build a healthy plate. This seems a little overwhelming and unrealistic to some people because most Americans have not been eating this way despite many years of recommendations to eat more fruits and vegetables. It's important to recognize that you may not be able to get to the ideal goal for fruits and vegetables all at once. Use MyPlate as a visual reminder of a healthy eating goal you should strive for over time. The Choose My Plate.gov website contains many simple suggestions to help you reach this goal. The closer you get, the healthier you're eating.

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