

Published by

## HEALTHY CHOICES FOR MIND AND BODY

Written by Ann Gerhardt, MD

### MyPyramid.gov - A Bounty of Nutrition Information

by Ann Gerhardt, MD (*Request a subscription via [algerhardt@sbcglobal.net](mailto:algerhardt@sbcglobal.net), or P.O.Box 19274, Sacramento, CA 95819. Reprints permissible only if the article's entire pages are kept intact.*)

(08/2005)

**Bottom line at the top:** IF you have Internet access and IF you have a lot of time and interest, and IF you are willing to weigh and measure, MyPyramid.gov can help you to improve your nutrition. If not, read on for an easy approach to healthy eating.

The US Department of Health and Human Services and the US Department of Agriculture issues dietary guidelines for Americans every five years. They base the new guidelines on recommendations from an outside committee that reviews the latest scientific evidence concerning diet and activity as they relate to health and chronic disease. The latest committee's recommendations ensure a healthy amount of each nutrient and meet general goals through a variety of foods from each food group (see side bar).

The goals and huge amount of information in MyPyramid.gov are laudable, but there are short-comings. The good news is that, by using a website, MyPyramid.gov imparts far more information than did the old Food Guide Pyramid. Each food group recommendation defines serving sizes and distinguishes between healthy and less healthy food group choices. MyPyramid.gov tailors recommendations to an individual's age, sex and activity level. It serves up information about the nutrition facts label on packaged foods, food safety, calories burned with physical activity, the impact of nutrition on various diseases, and food composition. The recommendations accommodate vegetarians and provide examples for implementation. It makes a huge positive step by emphasizing exercise.

#### Deficiencies of MyPyramid.gov are:

- 1) It recommends average calorie levels and food group intakes based on only three variables - age, sex and activity level. A good calorie requirement calculation must include height. A 30 year-old male exercising 30-60 minutes per day who is 5 foot 5 inches tall needs significantly less food and calories than one who is 6 foot 4 inches tall. An 'average' calorie requirement of 2600 calories overshoots the small man's needs and leaves the large man hungry;
- 2) The recommendations ignore differences in metabolism. We are NOT all created equal with respect to the way we handle nutrients and calories. The balance of fat and carbohydrate calories is especially problematic. Some people develop a pre-diabetes condition of insulin resistance with high carbohydrate loads, others clog their blood with fat if they ingest excess fructose (a type of sugar), and some do fine with sugar, but raise their cholesterol levels and gain weight with fatty meals;
- 3) It specifies serving sizes that mean little to most people. For example, it prescribes the amount of fat (oil) to eat each day in teaspoons. Very few people have a concept of the amount of oil in a teaspoon, or how to translate that quantity into a daily diet;

#### MyPyramid.gov Nutrition Goals

Calories to maintain optimum weight  
All types of fruits and vegetables  
Half of starches as whole grains  
3 low fat dairy foods per day  
Include a variety of protein foods  
<10% of calories from saturated fat  
<300 mg cholesterol per day  
2 fish servings per week  
Fiber-rich foods  
Less sugar  
Less salt

- 4) It is huge. The numerous links and explanatory bits of information are informative, but probably overwhelming for most regular people;
- 5) As huge as the website is, it leaves the reader with unanswered questions. For example, the grains page suggests eating grains that contain “less sugars and oils.” What exactly constitutes less? To answer that question, one must explore the pages concerning extras and oils, then wonder whether they count as part of some overlapping food group. The link to the eighty page Dietary Guidelines For Americans 2005 might fill in some of the blanks;
- 6) It is web based. This won't serve the needs of the vast majority of Americans, especially those without a computer. The current print version, a poster of a pyramid with a fan of colors, doesn't impart any useful information. One might as well bumble along with memories of the basic Four Food Groups, which at least contained a large fruit and vegetables group.
- 7) Critics of the new pyramid think that the goals reach for pie-in-the-sky for many people. For example, vegetable recipe ideas are useless to people who live in neighborhoods without a grocery store that sells them.

## **HOW TO EAT, CONDENSED VERSION**

**EAT A LARGER VOLUME OF VEGETABLES THAN ANYTHING OTHER FOOD GROUP.** Most people don't, but should. Even many vegetarians don't eat enough vegetables (they fill up on starches). MyPyramid wants you to eat from 1.5 to 4 cups per day, the lesser amount by children and small or old people and the higher end for large or young, active adults. Variety is best, to supply different nutrients. The ones that grow underground, like potatoes, carrots and rutabagas are starchier, so they have more calories. The above-ground types, like spinach, peppers and squash, supply fewer calories. MyPyramid.gov and many cookbooks offer suggestions for incorporating vegetables into meals.

**EAT THREE SERVINGS OF DAIRY FOODS PER DAY.** The major goal of pushing dairy is to deliver enough potassium, calcium, other minerals, a few vitamins and protein. Most vegetarians and carnivores accept dairy. For people intolerant of dairy, the website offers replacement suggestions for calcium (tofu, canned fish with bones and calcium fortified cereals and juice), but emphasizes that these foods do not replace dairy's entire nutritional value.

**EAT 1 ½ (for small people) TO 2 ½ (for larger people) CUPS OF FRUITS PER DAY.** Fruits supply fiber, vitamins, bioflavonoids and sugar. Choose fruits, rather than juices, to get the fiber. Vary the color to vary the nutrients. Eat them when you crave something sweet. They DON'T replace vegetables: We need both.

**WE NEED TO EAT STARCHES TO PROVIDE ENERGY - AT LEAST HALF SHOULD BE WHOLE GRAINS.** Regardless of whether you eat low carb or low fat or in between, you need energy for your organs to function and to fuel daily activity. Regulate the amount you eat by eating only when stomach-hungry and stopping when satiated. If you don't feel hunger and fullness, use the quantities suggested in MyPyramid.gov, or eat an amount equal to the volume of your fist with each meal and another fist-ful sometime during the day. Starch calories should be about half of your total daily calories (see below). Try to eat more oatmeal, barley, whole wheat, brown rice, bulgur and millet than refined (usually more white and fiber-less) alternatives.

**DO INCLUDE OILS, NUTS, SEEDS AND AVOCADO (not other types of solid fat) IN YOUR DIET.** We need a balance of calories, from starches, protein foods and fat. Dietary fat supplies vitamin E and essential fatty acids. As part of salads and dressings, stir fries, dipping sauces, home-made baked goods and other recipes, oils become a modest, tasty and necessary fraction of the total calories. Try to make the fat in your diet predominantly from plant rather than animal sources (non-hydrogenated), since they tend not to clog arteries.

**EAT ABOUT ½ GRAM PROTEIN FOR EVERY POUND OF YOUR IDEAL BODY WEIGHT** (see below). Most Americans eat far more protein than they need. Calculate your requirement, then read labels for protein content. Many protein foods do not have labels with nutrition information. Assume that each egg, 8 ounces of milk or yogurt, 1.5 ounces of cheese, 2/3 cups of beans, 1 ounce of meat, poultry or fish (1 ounce is

1/3 the size of a deck of cards), and 2 ounces of nuts has approximately 8 grams of protein. These are not exact, but neither will be your estimate of portion size. You won't need more than a few days of calculating and measuring to get an idea of what you should be eating. Eat a variety of both plant and animal protein foods.

**EXTRAS:** We all eat them. If you want to make chocolate or chips your own special, separate food group, fine. Keep it a small treat, not the basic staple of each meal. As a rule of thumb, limit calories from extras to two times your ideal body weight.

**EAT ONLY WHEN HUNGRY:** Do not eat because of boredom, fatigue, TV commercials, anger, excitement, sadness, to clean your plate, to eat all you paid for, because it looks good or to keep up with someone else.

**CALCULATE YOUR IDEAL BODY WEIGHT**, assuming average body type and musculature. If you don't like this number and want to choose another that you think fits you, go ahead.

Men: 110 pounds + 6 pounds for every inch over 5 feet tall.

Women: 100 pounds + 5 pounds for every inch over 5 feet tall. (Subtract 5 pounds for every inch under 5 feet.)

### **TO CALCULATE YOUR CALORIE NEEDS:**

#### **Basic calorie requirement:**

**Women:**  $655 + (4.36 \text{ multiplied times your ideal weight in pounds}) + (4.56 \text{ multiplied times your height in inches}) - (4.7 \text{ multiplied times your age in years})$ .

**Men:**  $66 + (6.23 \text{ multiplied times your ideal weight in pounds}) + (12.7 \text{ multiplied times your height in inches}) - (6.8 \text{ multiplied times your age in years})$ .

For example, a 40 year old woman, ideal weight 120 pounds, 5'4" (64 inches) tall, needs:  
 $655 + 4.36 \text{ times } 120 \text{ pounds} + 4.56 \text{ times } 64 \text{ inches} - 4.7 \text{ times } 40 \text{ years} = 1282 \text{ calories}$ .

Multiply your answer by an **activity factor** to estimate your **true energy needs**:

If sedentary, multiply by 1.2.

If lightly active, multiply by 1.375.

If moderately active, multiply by 1.55.

If very active, multiply by 1.725.

The example woman, if moderately active, needs  $1282 \times 1.55 = 1987$  calories per day