

## PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray & Harwood D. Schaffer

# Dietary guidelines over the years: Many changes but still no mention of chocolate

Growing up in the 1950s, we learned about the “Basic Four” food groups in elementary school. One of the elements lacking in this food guide was a lack of guidance on appropriate fats, sugars, and calorie intake. But compared to today with easy access to fast foods, large portions, and abundant sweets, childhood obesity was not as serious an issue. Working on the farm and walking to and from school provided plenty of opportunity to burn off any extra calories we consumed.

The Basic Four was a change from an earlier guideline provided by the USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) that included daily servings needed from each of seven food groups. It too did not provide guidance on serving sizes and was considered to be too complex to be effective.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the USDA tried two other food guides before settling on the familiar Food Pyramid that was adopted in 1992. The Food Pyramid was a total diet approach that set goals for both nutrient adequacy and moderation. By using the pyramid, it gave some focus to the issue of proportion and included visualization of added fats, oils, and sugars through five food groups and in the tip. Next to the tip were the words “Use Sparingly.” It also offered guidance on the range of daily amounts of food across three calorie levels.

The base of the pyramid was the “bread, cereal, rice, and pasta” with a recommended 6-11 servings a day. Above the base and on the same level were vegetables (3-5 servings) and Fruits (2-4 servings). Just below the tip were two groups: milk yogurt, cheese (2-3 servings) and meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs and nuts (2-3 servings).

The pyramid was modified in 2005 to make it simpler, but in the minds of many, even though it included the concept of physical activity, it was less understandable than previous food guidelines.

In reading the information about the new food guide that was introduced in June 2011, visual clarity and concern about the obesity epidemic in the US clearly were driving forces in its design and content. The new guideline uses the image of a plate with a glass placed in the upper right corner. The foods are sized on the plate in such a way that the proportions that one might put on their own plate are very clear. Half the plate is devoted to fruits and vegetables, a little over a quarter of the plate is devoted to grains (half of which should be whole grains), and a small quarter called protein. The circle for the glass is labeled dairy.

The goal of the new MyPlate icon is to remind people to make healthier food choices. In talking about the difficulty facing parents in today’s fast paced society, First Lady Michelle Obama says, “When mom or dad comes home from a long day of work, we’re already asked to be a chef, a referee, a cleaning crew. So it’s tough to be a nutritionist, too. But we do have time to take a look at our kids’ plates. As long as they’re half full of fruits and vegetables, and paired with lean proteins, whole grains and low-fat dairy, we’re golden. That’s how easy it is.”

“With so many food options available to consumers, it is often difficult to determine the best foods to put on our plates when building a healthy meal,” said Secretary Vilsack. “MyPlate is an uncomplicated symbol to help remind people to think about their food choices in order to lead healthier lifestyles. This effort is about more than just giving information, it is a matter of making people understand there are options and practical ways to apply them to their daily lives.”

The food plate uses the concepts contained in the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which was launched earlier. The guidelines are divided into three groups: balance calories, foods to increase, and foods to reduce. Included under balance calories, the guidelines urge consumers to enjoy their food, but eat less and to avoid oversized portions. Under foods to increase we see ideas included in the MyPlate icon: make half your plate fruits and vegetables, switch to fat-free or low fat (1%) milk and make half your grains whole grains. The foods to reduce are sugary drinks and those foods with high sodium levels.

Despite a thorough examination, we did not find a food group called chocolate though many of us treat it that way. Given the change in lifestyle that we have seen over our lifetimes, the new MyPlate icon is a persuasive way to deal with the obesity epidemic. The other key element of course is exercise.

No doubt we will just have get used to the idea that chocolate will never attain the status of being a basic food group.

Information on MyPlate can be found at [www.myplate.gov](http://www.myplate.gov).

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