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Pyramid power

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Nutrition guidance program wins praise for new approach in portion control

By **R.J. Ignelzi**
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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Millions of lives have been saved, extended, or generally improved thanks to modern health and medical innovations such as the electrocardiogram, penicillin and the new food pyramid.

The food pyramid? OK, so the government's new dietary program isn't in the same league as the Nobel-prize-winning enterprises. But don't tell that to the U.S. Department of Agriculture or the nutritionists who are singing its praises.

"We're offering people more detailed nutritional information and guidance than ever before," says Eric Hentges, executive director for the USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion in Washington, D.C.

Completely revised in April, the new dietary plan, along with an updated pyramid icon, has had a chance to settle in and become the basis for many consumers' diets and nutritionists' recommendations.

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One of the pyramid's biggest improvements, say dietitians, is the clear definition of a food serving in terms of ounces and cup measurements.

"We used to tell people to eat five to nine servings of vegetables and fruit, and they'd say, 'Oh my God, does that mean I have to eat nine bowls of spinach?'" says Cheryl Rock, professor of nutrition at the University of California San Diego School of Medicine.

Graphic:



[Using McPyramid](#)

they u have six huge bagels, way more than they should. By defining portions in terms of ounces and cups, it's come a long way in bringing people down to earth about what should be on their plate."

An even easier way to monitor food portions is by comparing recommended servings to familiar material goods, like a deck of cards, dice, or a CD.

"Portion sizes today are out of control. So when people have an objective measurement, they will do a lot better in watching their food volume," says registered dietitian Monica Callan of Sharp Center for Health Promotion. "People can relate to real-life objects more than measuring cups and scales."

With that in mind, the Currents Health section will be featuring "Portion Patrol," an occasional column spotlighting recommended food portion sizes and a familiar object of equivalent size.

"If people know what a real portion looks like and what their body needs, they're more likely to follow through with a healthy eating plan,"



CRISSY PASCUAL / Union-Tribune

SERVING SIZES

To make it easier to visualize one serving, picture common objects. A serving of chicken is equivalent to a deck of cards, while a serving of pasta is a tennis ball. Our new feature, Portion Patrol, will put one serving into perspective. The first up is ground beef.

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Callan says.

While there were initial concerns about accessibility to the Internet-based new pyramid and the complexity of the information it offers, local dietitians now seem to think MyPyramid is on the right track and a vast improvement over the 1992 model.

"I'm hearing mostly positive things about the new pyramid, and I, personally, find it very useful," Rock says. "It's practical, detailed and informative. And it personalizes it for people, giving them sample menus and calorie counts, something the (old pyramid) didn't do."

MyPyramid, offered via the Web site mypyramid.gov, offers 12 nutrition and calorie plans based on age, gender and physical activity level. The plans point out how much food should be consumed from each group, which foods offer the biggest nutritional bang for the buck and how to calculate a serving. The site also offers advice on how to incorporate the recommended food servings into any menu and gives tips on how to burn off calories.

Early critics feared the new pyramid program would only be available to the computer savvy, but so far that hasn't been a problem. Although a personalized nutrition plan is only available by going onto the site and using MyPyramid Tracker, the basic nutritional information is being communicated by other means to those without computer access.

"We've been partnering with food-stamp offices and local organizations to provide (MyPyramid food program) brochures and posters to educate people (on the new dietary guidelines) and pass the information along," says Katie Bogue, a registered dietitian and director of the San Diego-Imperial County Regional Nutrition Network, which includes the 5-A-Day Program.

Although some dietitians like Callan think MyPyramid is less than

Portion Patrol: Ground beef

TODAY'S FAVORITE FOOD:

Ground beef, especially lean meat, can be a good source of iron and protein – both key elements of a healthy diet, says Lisa Young, author of "The Portion Teller." It's also high in artery-clogging saturated fat, so it should be consumed in moderation.

The U.S. government recommends the average 50-year-old male consume 6 ounces of meat and beans daily. That means that if you play your portions right, your favorite burger can be guilt-free.

One serving of lean ground beef
= 3 ounces = a deck of cards or tape cassette

Calories: 187

Carbohydrates: 0 g

Fat: 12.6 g

Protein: 18.7 g

New government diet regulations make constructing your daily dietary intake as simple as building an actual pyramid. But with help visualizing portion sizes, at least some of the mystery surrounding your favorite foods can be solved. Visit www.MyPyramid.gov for more information.

– CHRISTINA ORLOVSKY

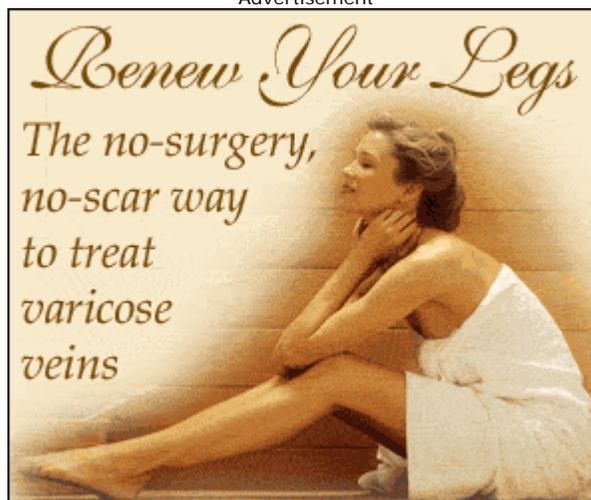
consumer-friendly, calling it "very information dense" and difficult for the average person "to weed through with any clarity," others, like nutrition professor Rock, thinks it's just what the dietitian ordered.

"The message I've been getting from people is that it's not confusing at all. In fact, I think it straightened out some of the confusion (of the old pyramid)," Rock says. "If my 80-year-old father can handle it, it can't be that bad."

According to USDA's Hentges, the consumer response has been "very, very good."

"In the past six months (since the new MyPyramid was introduced), we've had over 7,500 e-mail communications, and the vast majority have expressed enthusiastic approval," he says.

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Dietitians give a unanimous "thumbs-up" to MyPyramid's exercise component, which recommends at least 30 minutes a day of activity for general health and 60 to 90 minutes if weight loss is the goal.

"The old pyramid had nothing about physical activity, and that's a huge part of the obesity problem in this country," Bogue says, noting that nearly two-thirds of American adults are overweight or obese.

A children's pyramid, specifically aimed at 6-to 11-year-olds, was recently released offering dietary advice combined with an interactive computer game to hopefully combat the growing obesity epidemic among kids. Like the adult pyramid, the children's version urges them to fill up on fruit and vegetables, eat whole grains, get plenty of low-fat or fat-free, calcium-rich foods and "go lean with protein." Physical activity is another key component of the children's pyramid, just as it is for the adult program. Kids, however, are advised to get at least 60 minutes daily of activity.

The USDA's Hentges says some other "enhancements" will be added to MyPyramid in the next few months, including a Spanish version of the program and more personalization of the diet-exercise plans.

Dietitians hope that the new food pyramid can become a sensible and healthy alternative to the trendy and often unhealthy diets that so many American try.

"A lot of overweight people look to crazy diet books for what to eat. But, this is a sound, nutritional eating plan based on calorie levels. And, it's free," Rock says. "The new pyramid gives people some dietary structure to aim for, but at the same time, it's realistic. No exotic foods and

nothing you can't find at Ralph's or Von's. It's a very doable diet plan."

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