

Healthy diet basics: Using a food pyramid

A food pyramid is one tool to help you eat better. Find out how to use a food pyramid to create a healthy diet.

Perhaps you've noticed that the days of the four basic food groups — dairy, meat, vegetables and fruit — are long gone. Today, a healthy diet encompasses a far wider range of options: whole grains, legumes, seeds and nuts, fish, and even plant oils, such as olive oil. Add in ethnic, religious, cultural and personal preferences, and you have more options than ever before when planning healthy meals and snacks.

A healthy eating plan can be illustrated in many ways, but it's often found in the shape of a pyramid. These pyramids outline various food groups and food choices that, if eaten in the right quantities, form the foundation of a healthy diet.

The pyramid plan

Guidelines for choosing foods are widely represented in various food pyramids. The triangular shape of the pyramid shows you where to focus when selecting foods. Foods to eat the most of create the base of the pyramid, and foods to eat in smaller amounts or less frequently are shown farther up the pyramid.

A pyramid familiar to most Americans is the Food Guide Pyramid, established by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of Health and Human Services in 1992. The Food Guide Pyramid has since been replaced with MyPyramid, a new symbol and interactive food guidance system that provides a more personalized eating plan based upon your age, sex and daily amount of physical activity.

Many other pyramids exist, however. These include the Asian, Latin American and Mediterranean diet pyramids, the Mayo Clinic Healthy Weight Pyramid, and the x Healthy diet basics: Using a food pyramid

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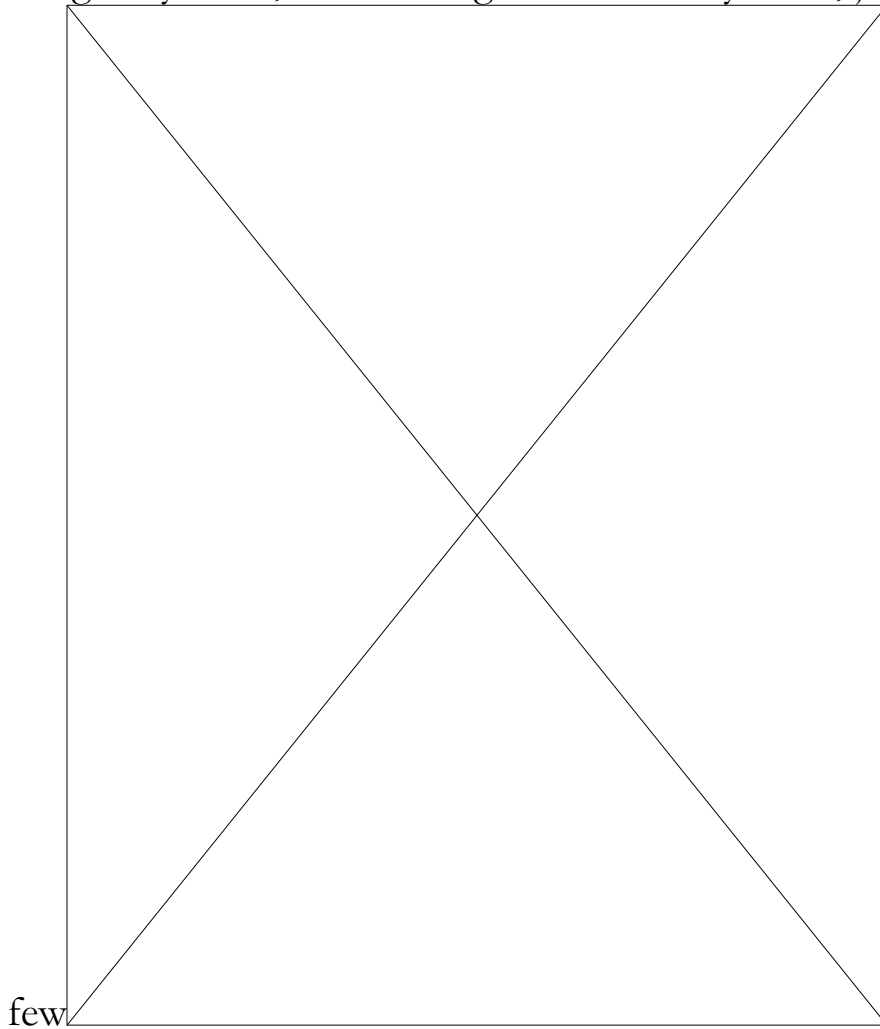
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Weight Pyramid, and the Vegetarian Diet Pyramid, just to name a



Basic principles of all food pyramids

With the variety of food pyramids available, you may wonder which one to follow. It may help to know that the basic principles of food pyramids are largely the same and generally emphasize the following:

- Eat more fruits, vegetables and whole grains.
- Reduce intake of saturated fat, trans fat and cholesterol.
- Limit sweets and salt.
- Drink alcoholic beverages in moderation, if at all.

- Control portion sizes and the total number of calories you consume.
- Include physical activity in your daily routine.

Food pyramids place foods in categories — such as dairy products or meat and beans — to help guide your food choices. No single food provides all of the nutrients that your body needs, so eating a variety of foods within each group ensures that you get the necessary nutrients and other substances that promote good health.

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Food pyramid differences

Although food pyramids reflect the same general principles of healthy eating, they demonstrate different food choices. These differences reflect dietary preferences, food availability and cultural eating patterns. For example, the Latin American Diet Pyramid might include tortillas and cornmeal within the grains food group, whereas the Asian Diet Pyramid might emphasize noodles and rice.

Other differences include:

- **Food groups.** The food groups among food pyramids may vary somewhat. For example, some might group plant-based proteins — soybeans, beans and nuts — separately from animal proteins found in meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products. This is because animal proteins are often higher in fat and cholesterol, and some diets limit animal proteins.

- **Serving recommendations.** How food pyramids address servings also varies. The Mayo Clinic Healthy Weight Pyramid, for example, recommends a daily number of servings from each food group. And it specifically defines serving sizes; for example, a serving of rice is 1/3 cup and a serving of milk is 1 cup. But other plans offer more general guidelines, such as eating particular foods at every meal, or on a weekly or monthly basis. For example, the Latin American Diet Pyramid recommends that you eat whole grains, vegetables and fruits at every meal but eat red meat, sweets and eggs once a week or less.

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- [Mayo Clinic Healthy Weight Pyramid: A sample menu](#)

How to use a food pyramid

To see how your diet matches up to any of these pyramids, keep a food diary for several days. Then compare how much of your diet comes from the various levels. If you're top-heavy, work your way toward the bottom of the pyramid by making small, gradual changes, such as eating more vegetables, fruits and whole grains and limiting fats and sweets.

Here are a few simple practices to help get or keep you on track:

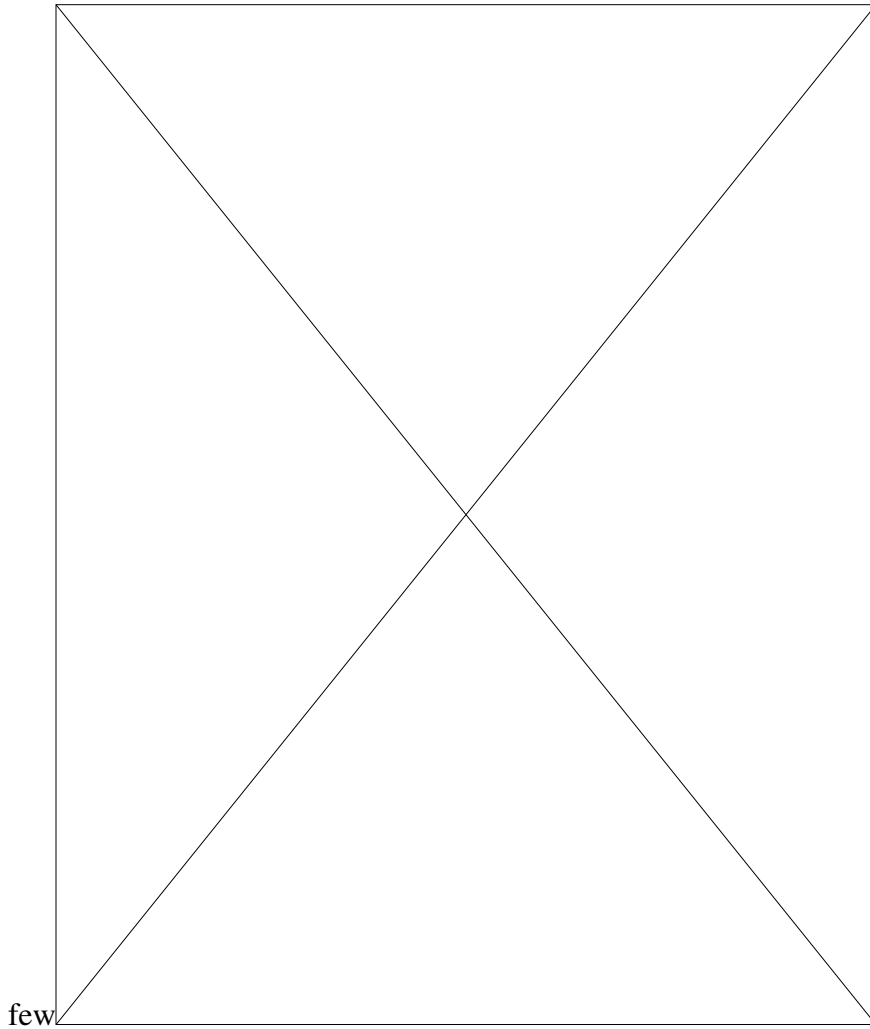
- **Choose a variety of foods from each major food group.** This ensures that you get all of the calories, protein, vitamins, minerals and fiber you need. Choosing a wide range of foods also helps make your meals and snacks more interesting.
- **Adapt the plan to your specific tastes and preferences.** For example, a serving of grains doesn't only mean a slice of wheat bread. It can be wild rice, whole-wheat pasta, grits, bulgur, cornmeal muffins, or even popcorn.

- **Combine foods from each major group however you like.** For example, you might make a meal of tortillas (grain group) and beans (meat and beans group). Or you could top your fish with fruit salsa or serve steamed vegetables over pasta. The possibilities are endless.
- **Select your meals and snacks wisely.** Make the most of what you eat by choosing nutrient-rich foods within each group. And if you need to avoid foods from one or more food groups — for example, if you don't consume dairy products because of lactose intolerance — choose other foods that are good sources of the nutrients found in those foods.

Remember to be open and creative, and go for good taste! Eating well and eating healthy are very compatible.

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