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Review Article

The New Food Pyramid Proposed by The Dietary Guidelines for Americans – 2026 Update

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Abstract

A balanced diet is essential for a healthy life, and the food pyramid provides a simple visual guide to making good choices. The food pyramid is a graphic representation of nutritional recommendations, designed to guide people towards a healthy and balanced diet. It illustrates the types of foods and the amounts recommended for daily consumption, in order to maintain health and prevent nutrition-related diseases. The food pyramid is a visual guide on which a balanced diet is based. This representation is designed to determine the population to follow the dietary advice provided by a qualified medical organization. To interpret this schematization of the daily food ration, it has been agreed that the foods placed at the top are those that should be consumed in smaller quantities and with low frequency, and those placed at the bottom are those that should be consumed with greater frequency and in larger quantities. One of the fundamental principles of the food pyramid is proportion. It is essential to understand that the pyramid not only recommends certain types of foods, but also the proportion in which they should be consumed.

Keywords: Food pyramid, Food pyramid, Daily food ration, Types of foods, Healthy life.

Introduction

The “new food pyramid” recently promoted in public space has made waves because it overturns some of the messages we grew up with: fats are no longer automatically “guilty”, protein is back in the center, and carbohydrates are viewed through the filter of quality and metabolic impact, not just “calories”.

For some, this change is a breath of fresh air: finally, people are talking about real food, about how harmful ultra-processed products can be, and about the fact that the same recommendation cannot work the same for a 45-year-old woman with insulin resistance and chronic stress as for a 25-year-old man who exercises daily.

For others, it is a dangerous “revolution”, with the risk of fueling extremes: too much meat, too little fiber, confusion around oils, or hasty reinterpretations of cholesterol.

So what does the new paradigm change, where do the con-

troversies come from, and what is worth remembering if you want real results: stable energy, more manageable weight, better digestion, and less inflammation. No dogmas, no fear of food, and no “one-size-fits-all solutions.” [1]

What is the food pyramid and how did it evolve?

The concept of the food pyramid originated in Sweden in 1974. The version that is widely used worldwide was developed in 1992 by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). This first version was structured into four main levels, corresponding to the basic food groups. Over time, the food pyramid has been constantly updated, reflecting scientific advances in the field of nutrition. Major changes include the emphasis on whole grains, increasing the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables, differentiating the types of fats (while promoting healthy fats), and including physical

activity in the recommendations. It is important to consume an adequate amount of vitamins to maintain our health. In 2005, the USDA launched MyPyramid, an updated version that introduced the idea of personalizing recommendations based on age, gender, and level of physical activity. Later, in 2011, MyPyramid was replaced by MyPlate, a model that uses the image of a plate to illustrate the ideal proportions of food groups. The food pyramid is a useful tool to guide you in choosing the right foods for a healthy and balanced diet [2,3]. On January 7, 2026, the United States Food and Drug Administration released the 2025–2030 Dietary Guidelines, an official document that sets out the major dietary guidelines for the next five years. This guide, which includes major changes to the food pyramid, has a significant impact not only on the American population, but also on food and public health policies globally [1].

The structure of the food pyramid

The food pyramid is made up of several levels, each representing a specific food group and the recommended amount to consume. At the base of the pyramid are cereals and their products, which should make up the majority of the daily diet (6-11 servings). It is important to include soluble and insoluble dietary fiber in our diet, as they play an essential role in digestive health. The next level is occupied by vegetables and fruits, recommended in 5-9 servings per day. Vegetables are an important source of vitamins, minerals and fiber, and fruits provide vitamins and antioxidants. The third level includes dairy products and protein sources, such as lean meat, fish, eggs and legumes. 2-3 servings are recommended daily, to ensure the need for calcium, protein and other essential nutrients. At the top of the pyramid are fats, oils and sweets, which should be consumed in small quantities. These foods have a high caloric value but a low nutritional value, so they should be consumed in moderation. Basically, the food pyramid is divided into several sections, each representing a food group [4].

Food pyramid models

One of the first food pyramid models was designed in Sweden in 1972 by following a heated controversy over the increasing number of people prone to obesity.

The next food pyramid model was created in 1992 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and was revised in 2005 with significant changes. In the original version of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, the pyramid was structured horizontally, with foods grouped as follows: grains and their derivatives (base of the pyramid); vegetables; fresh fruits; milk and dairy products; meat, fish, eggs and legumes; sugars and fats (top of the pyramid).

In the 1992 pyramid model, the six food groups were retained, but the horizontal fields were replaced with vertical

fields of different colors: orange: grains and their derivatives; green: fresh vegetables; red: fresh fruit; yellow: oils and fats; blue: dairy products; purple: meat, fish and legumes. Although this new pyramid has improved the original model of the food pyramid (distinguishing between good and bad fats and encouraging the consumption of lean meat instead of red meat), its use is not without its drawbacks.

In some countries, the structure of the old pyramid has been preserved to design a food pyramid adapted to the national context. Thus, in Spain, different models of the food pyramid have been proposed, following the traditional model, which has also been updated. In the latest version, the pyramid is divided into two large areas: the upper one, which groups foods consumed occasionally, and the lower one, which contains foods that should be consumed daily or weekly.

Finally, the food pyramid has been adapted to different types of diets (for example: the Mediterranean diet pyramid, which favors the consumption of fats in the form of olive oil, or the vegetarian diet pyramid).

In addition to the food pyramid, other forms of graphic materials have been proposed to contribute to the nutritional education of the general public, for example the food wheel. Since 2011, My Plate has replaced the food pyramid used in the United States.

Recently, important changes have been discussed in the American dietary guidelines. The new food pyramid, launched in early January, brings meat protein and whole dairy products to the fore, olive oil and vegetables, while grains have remained in the background. The new food pyramid was issued earlier this year, according to the indications of the Department of Public Health and Human Services and the Department of Agriculture of the United States of America.

Although the previous food pyramid was also issued by the Americans, in 1992, the initial nutritional guide has European origins. Specifically, the Swedes launched a list of nutritious and inexpensive staple foods in the 1970s, along with a series of additional foods, the list being influenced mainly by economic considerations, at that time food prices being high. The Americans then took over the idea and transformed it into what has remained internationally known to this day, with small changes that led to an increase in the proportions of vegetables and fruits, but also the concept of different groups for dairy and protein [5,6].

The role of micronutrients in healthy eating

Micronutrients, such as vitamins and minerals, are essential for the proper functioning of our bodies. Although the food pyramid emphasizes macronutrients (carbohydrates, proteins, and fats), micronutrients should not be neglected. Vitamins A, C, D, E, and K, minerals such as iron, calcium, and magnesium, and trace elements such as zinc and copper are necessary for healthy bones, skin, immune system, and ner-

vous system. For example, vitamin D deficiency can lead to brittle bones, while iron deficiency can cause anemia. These essential elements can be obtained from a variety of foods, and the food pyramid suggests food sources that are richest in these nutrients [7].

Recommendations for a healthy diet based on the food pyramid

For a balanced and healthy diet, it is important to follow the principles of the food pyramid. An essential aspect is variety. Try to include different foods from each group to ensure a complete intake of nutrients. It also adjusts portion sizes based on age, gender, and level of physical activity. It is important to adapt the food pyramid to our specific needs. Next, we will explore how the recommendations change depending on the different stages of life [8].

The importance of hydration in healthy eating

In addition to nutrition, another essential factor in healthy living is hydration. Water plays a vital role in every function of our body, from digestion and nutrient transport, to maintaining body temperature and supporting kidney function. Although food can help hydrate the body (fruits and vegetables contain a lot of water), it is also important to consume fluids, ideally water, throughout the day. Insufficient water consumption can lead to dehydration, which affects concentration, energy levels, and overall health. Specialists recommend about 2 liters of water per day, but this amount can vary depending on factors such as age, gender, physical activity, and climate. Adapting the food pyramid to different stages of life ensures optimal nutrition. Let's now see what the health benefits of following these recommendations are [9].

Benefits of following the food pyramid for health

An important aspect of applying the food pyramid is nutritional education. People who are correctly informed about the benefits of a balanced diet are more likely to apply the recommendations of the pyramid. Nutrition education can be implemented at the school level, through nutrition courses, but also at the community or individual family level. Awareness of the importance of a healthy diet, accompanied by useful advice on food choices, can positively influence individuals' eating habits in the long term. Thus, nutritional education is the key to changing lifestyle and preventing diseases associated with an incorrect diet. Following the indications in the food pyramid brings numerous health benefits, both in the short and long term [10].

Modern challenges and adaptations of the food pyramid

In recent decades, the food pyramid has been modified to respond to new challenges and scientific discoveries in the field of nutrition. One of the most important changes has been the transition from the classic model to more adaptable and personalized concepts. An important aspect to mention is the

importance of potassium in the diet. Consuming foods rich in potassium can bring many benefits to the body, from maintaining normal blood pressure to proper muscle function. An important issue has been adapting the food pyramid to cultural diversity and specific dietary regimens. Thus, variants such as the Mediterranean pyramid (which emphasizes olive oil, fish and vegetables), the Asian pyramid (which includes rice and soy as staple foods), as well as the vegetarian and vegan pyramids (which do not include animal products) have emerged. The recommendation to do physical activity has also been included. The new variants of the food pyramid emphasize the importance of regular physical exercise, recommending at least 30 minutes of daily activity for adults. Concerns about protecting the environment have led to the emergence of models that encourage the consumption of local and seasonal foods [11].

The impact of modern and alternative diets

Currently, modern and alternative diets, such as the keto, paleo or intermittent fasting diet, are gaining increasing popularity. These diets often deviate from the traditional recommendations of the food pyramid, promoting low-carb or completely limiting certain food groups. The keto diet, for example, emphasizes healthy fats and protein while almost completely limiting carbohydrates. The paleo diet focuses on unprocessed foods, excluding grains and dairy. While these diets may have short-term benefits, it is important to adopt a balance and avoid completely excluding certain food groups that are essential for long-term health. Adapting the food pyramid can include moderation in the integration of such diets, but without neglecting the full intake of nutrients [12].

Conclusion

Adopting the food pyramid for a healthy life

The food pyramid is a valuable guide for building a balanced diet and maintaining long-term health. Each level of the pyramid teaches us to make more conscious choices and include foods from all the groups essential for the optimal functioning of our body. From whole grains and vegetables rich in vitamins and minerals, to healthy proteins and beneficial fats, following these recommendations can prevent chronic diseases and support an active and balanced life. It is important to adapt the pyramid recommendations according to age, physical activity and individual health conditions. Also, food education and awareness of the importance of a proper diet are essential factors for long-term success in adopting a healthy lifestyle. By adopting the principles of the food pyramid, you not only improve your health, but you also create a habit that can positively influence the entire family. So don't forget: feed your body with nutritious foods, drink enough water, exercise and choose a balanced lifestyle to enjoy a long and healthy life. Therefore, the new recommendations bring

to mind the symbol of the food pyramid, but inverted: that is, the most recommended foods (protein, vegetables, fruits, dairy, healthy fats) now appear as preferred (at the top), and refined carbohydrates and processed foods are placed as the least preferred food choices (at the base of the pyramid). The old recommendations promoted a balance between the main food groups – with grains and healthy carbohydrates as the base – while emphasizing the limitation of saturated fats.

Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there are no competing interests or conflicts of interest to disclose

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