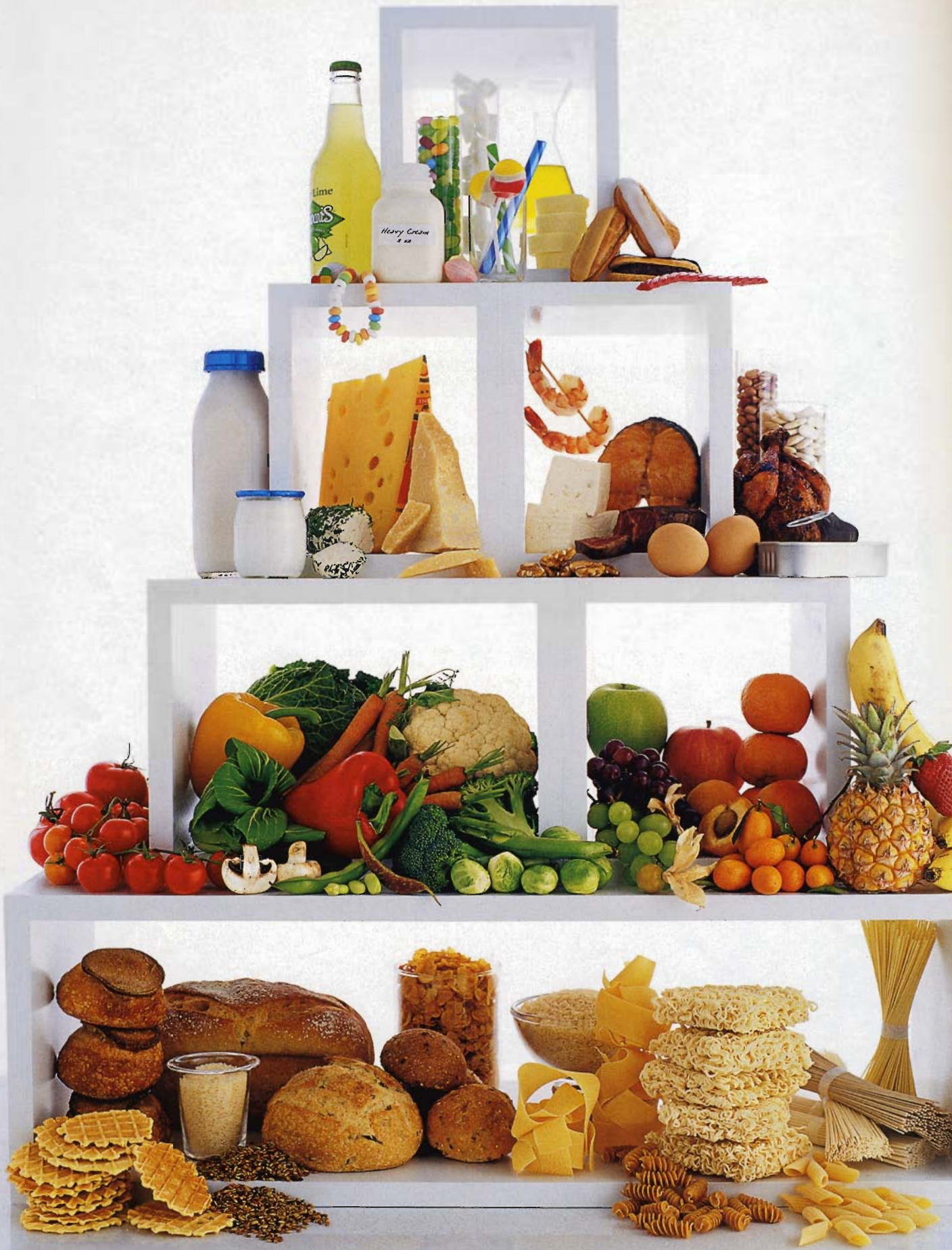


Is The Food Pyramid Making You Fat

Critics say the decade-old dietary guide hasn't kept up with nutrition and weight-loss research. Here, four "flaws" and the fixes you should make. ▶



by Barry Yeoman ■ photographs by Quentin Bacon

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iets come and go, but the official model for healthy eating hasn't changed—at least since 1992, when the United States Department of Agriculture created the Food Guide Pyramid. Its nutritional guidelines are easy to follow: Eat a certain number of fruits, vegetables, meats, grains and dairy servings each day—and be sparing in the use of fats and sweets—and you'll maintain a healthy weight and reduce your risk of disease. But a growing number of physicians and nutritionists feel that the pyramid doesn't help with either goal.

"The food pyramid represents a lost opportunity to improve health," says Walter Willett, M.D., chairman of the nutrition department of the Harvard School of Public Health and author of *Eat, Drink and Be Healthy* (Simon & Schuster Source, 2001). "Diet can have a tremendous impact on heart disease, cancer and diabetes, but the recommendations don't give people the information they need to make healthy choices." Dr. Willett's disillusionment with the government model led to the development of his own: the Harvard School of Public Health's Healthy Eating Pyramid.

Where did the government model go wrong? "The number one problem is that it doesn't address our individual needs and preferences," says Michael Hirt, M.D., medical director of the Center for Integrative Medicine at California's Encino-Tarzana Regional Medical Center. Many Americans are lactose-intolerant; others eschew red meat. Serious athletes may require 12 servings of "foods that come from grains" (breads, cereals, rice and pasta), while their less active counterparts need just six. Some people who follow the USDA's guidelines won't gain a pound; others will get fat.

We asked diet and nutrition experts at top institutions around the country to identify their four biggest concerns with the pyramid and to provide the adjustments necessary to keep us all fit, energetic and disease-free.

1 It doesn't distinguish among grains

THE BROAD BASE OF THE FOOD GUIDE PYRAMID INCLUDES bread, cereal, rice and pasta, of which you're allowed six to 11 servings. The problem is that it lumps together whole grains—which contain fiber and essential vitamins and minerals—and processed ones, which have lost much of their nutritional value, says Kathy McManus, R.D., director of nutrition at Brigham & Women's Hospital in Boston.

Refined starches like white bread, white rice and white pasta are easily converted into sugars. Eating them triggers

a large output of insulin in the bloodstream, which dramatically lowers blood sugar. "What's more," says McManus, "these sugar spikes strain the pancreas, which must produce insulin in response to your blood-sugar level." Over time, she adds, the pancreas could eventually stop functioning properly, leading to type 2 diabetes.

By contrast, the fiber found in unprocessed grains (whole wheat, oats, whole barley) slows the absorption of sugar, which, in turn, eases stress on the pancreas, says Dr. Willett. Whole grains have been linked in studies to lower rates of heart disease, better gastrointestinal health and possibly a reduced risk of some cancers.

FOOD FIX: McManus and Dr. Willett advise sticking with fiber-rich complex carbohydrates—brown rice, whole wheat and rye breads, and breakfast cereals with whole grains—to slow digestion and stabilize blood sugar levels. Read labels for the words "made from whole grains." You can also experiment with more exotic-sounding but widely available foods such as bulgur, quinoa, oat groats and wheat berries.

2 It overemphasizes meat

THE PYRAMID ALLOWS TWO TO THREE SERVINGS FROM the group called "Meat, Poultry, Fish, Dry Beans, Eggs & Nuts." But the visual includes a big slab of steak and a whole chicken, giving the impression that meat—and lots of it—is an essential part of a healthy diet. While experts agree that lean meat is fine in moderation, too much saturated fat (found in all animal protein) can lead to serious health complications, including elevated risk of heart disease.

FOOD FIX: Incorporate a variety of protein sources into your diet. You might, for example, sprinkle kidney beans or walnuts on your salad, stir-fry tofu or add some to a sandwich. "If you want a steak, that's fine," says Cathy Nonas, R.D., director of diabetes and obesity programs at North General Hospital in New York City. It's a good natural food source of iron. "But you don't need a 16-ounce steak," she says. "Make it a side dish rather than the main course." Opt for fish, poultry and leaner cuts of beef like sirloin and flank steak over fattier types like hamburger and ribs.

Vegetarians can get their daily protein allotment from soy products, nuts, grains and legumes. "Your average vegetarian is 10 percent leaner than a meat eater," says Neal Barnard, M.D., president of the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, citing studies from the *American Journal of Public Health* and *Nutrition Research*. Other research has shown that a well-balanced meat-free diet lowers blood pressure and cholesterol levels.

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THE PYRAMID THAT STARTED IT ALL: Whereas the USDA Pyramid is based on the way the government feels you *should* eat, the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid (oldwayspt.org/pyramids/med/p_med.html) is based on the way people actually *do* eat. Reflecting cultural eating patterns around the world, this model focuses on daily consumption of carbs, fresh fruits and vegetables, beans, legumes, nuts, olive oil, cheese and yogurt.



One bowl of restaurant pasta can be five times the standard USDA-recommended serving.

3 It doesn't specify portion sizes

THE PYRAMID CALLS FOR SIX TO 11 SERVINGS OF THE grain group, two to three servings of dairy and two to three servings of meat and other protein sources. "When people see those numbers, they feel they've won the lottery," says Joan Salge Blake, R.D., a clinical assistant professor of nutrition at Boston University. "But the serving size is smaller than what they're envisioning—say, just six ounces of fruit juice as opposed to 10, or one cup of cornflakes rather than two." Our increasingly "supersized" foods add to the confu-

sion. One bagel or a bowl of restaurant pasta might be five times the standard USDA-recommended serving. "My clients will say, 'I had a serving of chicken,'" Blake says. "When I ask them how big, they'll use their hands to show me the size of a whole chicken breast. That's at least two servings!" Overestimate amounts too often, she adds, and you're eating your way toward obesity.

FOOD FIX: Familiarize yourself with serving sizes. The USDA publishes a booklet listing these for each food group (download it at usda.gov/cnpp/pyrabklt.pdf). A serving of meat or poultry is two to three ounces; dried cereal, one ounce; and unprocessed cheese, one and a half ounces. Use a measuring cup or scale until you're able to eyeball portions with ease.

4 It implies that all fats are bad

AT THE TOP TIER OF THE FOOD PYRAMID, OILS AND FATS ARE lumped together with sweets, with the warning to “use sparingly.” Unfortunately, the government doesn’t distinguish between heart-healthy monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats (olive, peanut and safflower oils) and saturated and trans fats (margarine, most processed foods), says McManus. Saturated and trans fats raise our LDL, or “bad” cholesterol, which clogs arteries, putting us at higher risk of heart disease. Unsaturated fats do the opposite, reducing levels of low-density LDL while possibly raising levels of HDL, or “good” cholesterol.

A low-fat diet may also contribute to weight gain. In a 2001 study, McManus and two researchers followed the progress of 100 overweight men and women—half the group followed a low-fat diet, while the other half ate a Mediterranean-style diet with a moderate fat intake. While only 20 percent of the low-fat dieters stuck with the program, 54 percent of the moderate-fat group kept up their regimens. “Fats are satisfying,” says McManus. “These participants didn’t feel like they were dieting, which kept them going longer.”

FOOD FIX: Make sure that up to 35 percent of your total daily calorie intake comes from healthy fats like olive, canola and peanut oils. Limit your intake of saturated fat to 10 percent or less. Be aware that there are saturated fats in animal- and dairy-based foods, coconut milk and palm oil. “Always read ingredient labels,” says Dr. Willett. “If a food contains partially hydrogenated oils or vegetable shortening, avoid it.”

A glass oil dispenser with olive oil and a butter dish with butter. The oil dispenser is on the left, filled with a golden-yellow liquid. The butter dish is on the right, containing a block of butter with a knife resting on it.

Fats are not created equal: Olive oil is higher in monounsaturated (healthy) fatty acids; margarine has more saturated (unhealthy) ones.