Living Food Pyramid

By Charyn Pfeuffer

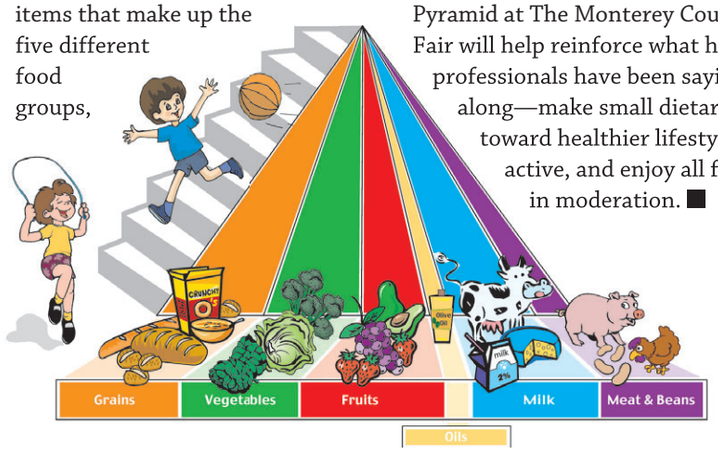
Americans are getting heavier and less healthy—almost two-thirds of Americans are overweight or obese, and more than half of them do not get enough physical activity.

We're spending more time in front of computer screens and TV sets than playing sports or going to the gym. We're spending more time behind the wheel, instead of walking or biking to our final destinations. In an effort to help people understand how to eat right and exercise to stay healthy, The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) revised its Food Guide Pyramid last year. The new dietary guidelines emphasizes that kids especially eat more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains with limited amounts of meats, oils, and fat, and that they get 30 to 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise each day.

The Food Guide Pyramid features a rainbow of colored, vertical stripes representing the five food groups (grains, vegetables, fruits, milk and dairy products, and meat, beans, fish, and nuts) plus fats and oils. Fats and oils, like olive oil, corn oil, soybean oil, and sunflower oil are essential nutrients to maintain body function but should be consumed sparingly. The six differently sized stripes (or steps) show how much of a person's daily food intake should be made up of that food group—the stripes are wider at the bottom of the pyramid than they are at the top. The different colors help illustrate that it's important to eat a variety of different foods. A cartoon human climbing to the top of the pyramid reminds us of the importance that exercise plays in benefiting our bodies.

This year, the Monterey County Fair is taking on the ambitious, albeit really fun task of creating a larger-than-life representation of the Food Guide Pyramid. Their version, a Living Food Pyramid, will physically display the various food items that make up the five different food groups, giving both kids and grown-ups an opportunity to see the foods they eat everyday from their actual sources. "A lot of kids don't know where their food actually comes from," says Fair Special Events Coordinator Lauren Heath. "We want to show the food at its most basic level— instead of pasta, we will use wheat stalks; instead of eggs, we will use live chickens," she adds. This creative visual depiction of the Food Guide Pyramid should help make it easier for people to understand the connection between the foods they eat and utilizing the pyramid to make smart food decisions. Heath adds that the display will also be like a quick boot camp in agricultural education.

It may seem like there are a dizzying number of rules to follow when it comes to eating right, but we all need a balance of the proper nutrients and exercise to grow (or stay) strong and healthy. The Living Food Pyramid at The Monterey County Fair will help reinforce what health professionals have been saying all along—make small dietary steps toward healthier lifestyles, be active, and enjoy all foods in moderation. ■



First ever Living Food Pyramid

Food Guide Pyramid Eating Guidelines

Bread, Cereal, Rice, and Pasta

6-11 servings a day

These complex carbohydrates provide B-vitamins, minerals, and fiber. Choose whole grain products whenever possible.

1 serving = 1 slice of bread, 1/2 bagel or bun, 1 ounce dry cereal, 1/2 cup cooked cereal, 1/2 cup cooked rice, 1/2 cup cooked pasta.

Vegetables

3-5 servings a day

Vegetables are a fantastic source of vitamins and fiber. They're also naturally low in fat and calories.

1 serving = 1 cup raw leafy greens, 1/2 cup any other chopped vegetable, 3/4 cup vegetable juice

Fruits

2-4 servings a day

Fruit makes a great snack or healthy dessert. It's high in carbohydrate energy and potassium, low in sodium, and full of vitamins.

1 serving = 1 medium apple, banana, or orange; 1/2 cup chopped fruit or berries; 3/4 cup fruit juice.

Milk, Yogurt, and Cheese

2-4 servings a day

Milk products are rich sources of calcium and they're also loaded with protein. A glass of milk or a cup of yogurt has high-quality protein equal to an ounce of meat or cheese or to one egg.

1 serving = 1 cup milk or yogurt, 1-1/2 ounces of natural cheese, 2 ounces of processed cheese.

Meat, Poultry, Fish, Dry Beans, Eggs, and Nuts

2-3 servings a day

This group is a major source of protein. Cooked beans are high in protein and fiber and low in fat. Tofu and white beans provide calcium. Almonds are good sources of vitamin E.

1 serving = 2-3 ounces of cooked lean meat, poultry, or fish; 1 egg; 1/2 cup cooked beans, 2 tablespoons peanut butter, nuts, or seeds.

Fats, Oils, and Sweets

Use sparingly

This group includes butter, oils, margarine, sour cream, soda pop, candy, and sweet desserts.

Mini-Boot Camp

To illustrate the new Physical Exercise portion of the Living Food Pyramid, students from the Naval Postgraduate School will hold a Mini-Boot Camp, including exercises using tires, jump ropes, and more. The Mini-Boot Camp is open to everyone at the Fair on Wednesday, and participants will be eligible to win prizes and a sticker they can be proud of: "I survived Boot Camp at the Monterey County Fair!"