

What is USDA's MyPlate?

In 2011 the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) released the latest icon representing its food guidance system, *MyPlate*. It is based on the same food grouping system that has been the foundation of nutrition education since the turn of the century, attesting to the system's effectiveness. Food groupings have endured because they have simplified the complicated world of nutrition.

The current food groupings and recommended servings from each group are outlined in the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. *Healthy Choices, Healthy Me!*, a Dairy Council of California program, aligns with these dietary guidelines.

The icon is intentionally simple. It was designed to remind consumers to eat a variety of foods from all five food groups at mealtimes. A strength of *MyPlate* is its depiction of a meal. Research strongly supports the benefits of shared family meals, so this icon has the potential to be an effective reinforcement of that healthy habit.

MyPlate is a “symbol” designed to raise awareness of healthy eating choices; it is not intended as a teaching tool in and of itself, nor is it intended to change people's eating behaviors alone.

In the past, food grouping systems focused only on ensuring sufficient amounts of essential nutrients. However, with a greater focus today on chronic disease prevention and the rising rates of obesity among our children as well as adults, a relevant food grouping system must also emphasize consuming only moderate amounts of added fats, sugars and sodium. Balancing calorie intake (foods) with calories expended (physical activity) becomes a priority. This is accomplished, in part, by increasing the amount of low-fat and fat-free milk products, vegetables, fruits, whole grains and lean meats in the diet. These are nutrient-dense foods that are naturally lower in calories and higher in essential nutrients.

Think of *MyPlate* as a puzzle. Food groups—which are made of foods that contain similar nutrients—represent the puzzle pieces. Like any other puzzle, the picture is incomplete if any piece is missing. The same is true of a nutritious diet. Each food group is equally important because it plays a different role in good health. Foods from all of the food groups are needed to form the foundation of a healthy diet. This is a positive, inclusive approach to healthy eating, as opposed to a focus only on foods to exclude or limit.

What are the benefits of teaching students to use a food grouping system?

Rather than having to memorize the nutrient and calorie content of every food they eat, a food grouping system provides children with a quick and easy way to remember what is important to eat.

A food grouping system provides an easy-to-use “frame of reference” for students. It offers food-choice standards against which to compare their own choices (in some ways, it is a rubric), and it works for all students, regardless of their situation, food preferences or cultural background.

What basic principles of healthy eating are supported through a food grouping system?

- **Balance**—This refers to the amount of food needed from each of the five food groups. The number of recommended servings from each food group varies; so, food choices must be balanced over a day's total food intake.
- **Variety**—In order to ensure a wide range of food choices that provide the broad range of nutrients children need for growth and development, daily food choices from all five food groups are encouraged. Children are further urged to sample a wide range of foods from within each food group.
- **Moderation**—Nutrient-rich foods, those that are higher in essential nutrients while modest in calories, are encouraged as the foundation of a healthy diet. Children are cautioned to be moderate in their choices of foods that are higher in added fats, sugars or sodium. No foods are “forbidden,” but some foods should be eaten in smaller amounts or less often.
- **Personalization**—One size does not fit all; there are endless combinations of food and physical activity choices that support a healthy lifestyle. A food grouping system supports individual choices. Small steps that match children's preferences and needs improve their diets and lifestyles each day.



Q Aren't food-choice guidelines and nutrition needs the same for children and adults?

A Children are unique in many ways—physically, intellectually, emotionally, socially and in their nutrition needs!

Some common **misperceptions** pertaining to the food-choice behaviors of children are:

- There are “good foods” and “bad foods.”
- All children need the same diet.
- All foods need to be low-fat.

Here's another view:

All foods have a place in the eating experiences of children. While some foods may be more nutritious

than others and should be encouraged, there are no forbidden foods. While all children need the same nutrients for good health, they do not need the same diets.

Not all foods must be low-fat. Children need calories for adequate growth and development. Each of the major food groups contributes specific nutrients, and each food group contains foods that vary in fat content. By eating a variety of foods from all food groups, children will obtain the nutrients they need while moderating their consumption of fats.

Q What are some of the specific nutrition and health issues for children?

A **Adequate calories** are essential to ensure optimum growth and development of children. Diets that severely restrict food choices, calories and/or fats are not recommended for children. These diets may lack the nutrients needed for normal growth and development.

Obesity, on the other hand, is a significant health issue facing children today. According to USDA, 27 percent of children ages 6 to 11 years are considered obese. The best way for most children to lose weight is to become more physically active rather than to significantly restrict calorie intake. Contributing factors to childhood obesity include:

1. Television viewing, which replaces physical activity and often encourages overeating.
2. Excessive intake of “extra” foods high in added fats, sugars and calories.
3. Overly large serving sizes at meals and snacks—whether at home or when eating out.

Calcium is critical for strong bones and teeth. Children need two to four times more calcium per body weight than adults. Research shows that the more calcium consumed in childhood, the stronger their bones as adults.

Taste is the primary influence on children's food choices. Help children learn to enjoy different tastes by exploring, preparing and tasting new foods.

Physical activity and play go hand-in-hand with healthy eating and are important to children's development. Children who are active at play one to two hours a day can eat a wider variety and amount of food, making it easier to get the nutrients and calories they need to grow and learn.

Q Are vegetarian diets appropriate for children?

A Generally, vegetarian diets that include some animal foods (particularly milk products and/or eggs) can meet the needs of growing children if the recommended amounts for each food group

are consumed. When choices are restricted solely to plant-based foods, it may be wise to consult with a physician or a registered dietitian to ensure that children get ample calories and essential nutrients.

Q If children are taking vitamin/mineral supplements, does it really matter what they eat?

A There is more to foods than what we read on labels. Although foods are grouped according to major nutrients, there are other compounds in foods that are necessary for good health. Some we know about; others, scientists are still exploring. Eating the recommended servings of food-group foods each day provides naturally nutrient-rich

sources of energy and key vitamins and minerals. A daily vitamin/mineral supplement that provides no more than 100 percent of the recommended dietary allowances may seem like “insurance” for getting enough nutrients, but it doesn’t replace the need for balanced food choices and nutrients from foods first.

Q Some of my students seldom get enough to eat. How are they supposed to make plans for improvement when food isn’t available?

A Hunger is a major health concern. Although choices may be limited, students should be encouraged to identify and eat food-group foods that are available to them. Meal programs such as school breakfast and school lunch are excellent opportunities for students to plan and make nutritious

selections. School lunch menus are designed to contribute one-third of children’s nutrient needs. School breakfast contributes 20 – 25 percent of a child’s daily needs. The key is to support any efforts students make to improve daily food choices.

Q What should I do if some of my students are lactose intolerant?

A Lactose intolerance, or the inability to digest milk sugar, is sometimes cited as an obstacle to children consuming Milk + Milk Products. Health professionals are specifically concerned that children who avoid milk products are not getting the calcium, protein, vitamin D and riboflavin they need for normal growth.

If milk and milk foods are not tolerated well (symptoms such as stomach cramps and diarrhea are common in children with lactose intolerance), the following suggestions should help:

- Choose milk products that contain less lactose, such as buttermilk, aged or ripened cheese, or yogurt.
- Eat or drink milk products along with other foods at a meal or with snacks to slow digestion.
- Look for yogurt and frozen yogurt with “active culture” on the label. The cultures help to “digest” lactose.
- Eat or drink milk products in smaller amounts but more frequently throughout the day.
- Use milk and cheese in cooking.
- Check labels for lactose-reduced milk products, including milk, ice cream and American cheese slices.

In addition, following are other foods that provide some calcium:

- Tofu prepared with calcium salts.
- Small fish with soft bones, such as sardines.
- Mung and soy beans.
- Dark leafy greens such as bok choy, mustard, dandelion and turnip greens, collards, kale and broccoli; but not spinach, beet greens or chard from which the calcium is not well absorbed.
- Refried beans, baked beans and lima beans.
- Corn tortillas, if the corn has been prepared in a lime solution, which is a source of calcium.