

What is USDA's MyPlate?

In 2011 the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) released the latest icon representing their 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. This 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 fat, sugar 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, fruits, vegetables, lean meats and whole grains 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 have 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 foods 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, that is, 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 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's choices. Small steps that match a child's preferences and needs can be taken to improve their diet and lifestyle each day.
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Common Questions Teachers Ask

Many food patterns show ranges of calorie levels and daily recommended amounts for each food group. “Exercise Your Options” shows specific amounts. Why the difference?

The 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans reflects recommended intakes based on multiple calorie levels. “Exercise Your Options” identifies recommended intakes specifically tailored to adolescent boys and girls based on average calorie intakes for 9-13 years of age, assuming a moderate activity level.

Program field test results indicate that it is more difficult for students to analyze their food choices and to plan for improvement using a range of daily amounts of food vs. one specific amount. Certainly, any given student could calculate their own age and physical activity levels.

The nutritional needs of adolescent boys and girls vary slightly. Specific recommended amounts for each allow them to create personal plans for improvement based on amounts that are more appropriate for them.

Pregnant teenagers should be encouraged to follow the same food group recommendations as set out in “Exercise Your Options.” Perhaps the biggest difference is that these amounts really become “minimums.” That is, they need to be encouraged to consume at least these amounts to ensure adequate intake of key nutrients and energy/calories for their own growth and for the development of the baby.

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

Lactose intolerance, or the inability to digest milk sugar, is sometimes cited as an obstacle to adolescents consuming milk and dairy products. Health professionals are specifically concerned with adolescent s getting enough calcium, protein and riboflavin they need for normal growth.

If milk and dairy foods are not tolerated well (symptoms such as cramps and diarrhea are common), the following suggestions should help:

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

In addition, other foods that provide some calcium are:

- 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 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.

Are vegetarian diets appropriate for adolescents?

Generally, vegetarian diets that include some animal foods (particularly milk products and/or eggs) can meet the needs of teenagers if the recommended amounts for each food group outlined in the 2010 Dietary Guidelines are

consumed. When choices are restricted solely to plant-based foods, as in “vegan” diets, it may be wise for students to consult a physician or registered dietician to ensure they get ample calories and essential nutrients.

If an adolescent is taking a vitamin/mineral supplement, does it really matter what he or she eats?

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 exploring. Eating the recommended amounts of food-group foods each day provides us with the proper mix of nutrients and energy. A daily vitamin/mineral supplement that provides no more than 100% of the recommended dietary allowances may seem like “insurance” that we get enough nutrients, but it doesn’t replace the need for balanced food choices and nutrients from foods first.

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

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 a teenager’s nutrient needs. School breakfast contributes 20-25% of a teenager’s daily needs. The key is to support and reinforce any efforts the student makes to improve his or her daily food choices.

My students are influenced a great deal by weight control advertisements they see on television or articles they read in magazines.

How can I help them begin to distinguish “fact” from “fiction?”

Nutrition and weight control are popular subjects in the media – from newspaper headlines to talk shows to teen magazines. There are a few guidelines students can apply when evaluating nutrition claims:

- Does the plan or diet include foods from all the food groups? (Be suspicious of any diet that recommends eliminating entire food groups.)
- Does the plan include foods that are easy to buy? Economical? Foods they could continue eating over time?
- Does the plan make outrageous promises (e.g. “lose 10 pounds in one week”)?
- Does the plan include exercise?

Why is skipping breakfast bad for students’ bones?

A study published in the June, 2005 *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* reveals that adolescent girls, particularly African-American girls, are most inclined to skip breakfast as they grow older. Skipping breakfast predisposes these girls to diets low in calcium and fiber, leading to greater risk for osteoporosis (bone-thinning disease) and higher body mass index, when compared to those who eat breakfast regularly.

Researchers found that adolescent girls who consistently eat breakfast have a lower body mass index and higher fiber and calcium intakes, suggesting that eating breakfast during pre-teen and teen years could help prevent the development of osteoporosis in adulthood.