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Are All Food Pyramids Created Equal?

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Public Confusion Over Healthy Eating

In a consumer survey, three of four Americans said there is too much conflicting information about diet (*How are Americans Making Food Choices?* ADA/IFIC, 1994).

Contributing to this confusion are several dietary pyramids that have begun to compete for the public's attention: The USDA Food Guide Pyramid (see graphic below), the Mediterranean Pyramid, the Asian Pyramid, and the Latin American Pyramid, among others. What do these pyramids, all with seemingly different messages, mean for the American

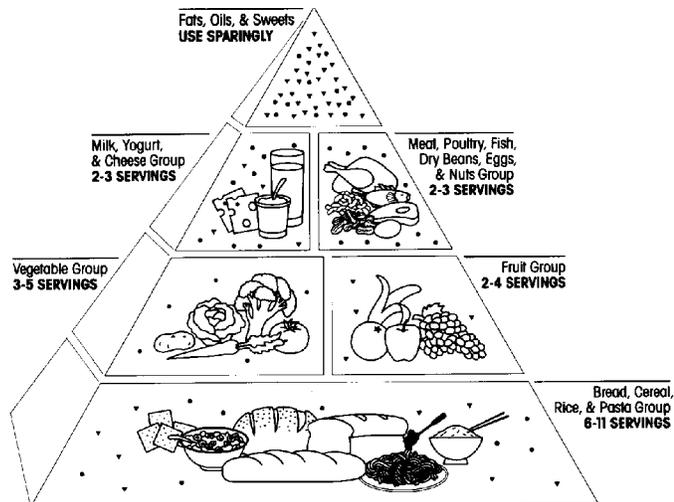
consumer? So the question is, **Are all food pyramids created equal?**

USDA Pyramid is Well Known

Sixty percent of Americans are familiar with the USDA Food Guide Pyramid. The USDA Food Guide Pyramid and the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* are key components of USDA's food and nutrition guidance system.

The *1995 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* provide nutrition guidance for healthy Americans 2 years of age and older. The Food Guide Pyramid helps consumers implement the Guidelines by suggesting types and amounts of foods for people of different ages and sexes.

USDA Food Guide Pyramid



Nutrition Insights

1. What are the Mediterranean, Asian, and Latin American Diet Pyramids?

The Mediterranean, Asian, and Latin American Diet Pyramids were produced by Oldways Preservation and Exchange Trust of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Oldways, a nonprofit company, developed these diet pyramids to illustrate traditional diets of cultures that epidemiological studies have associated with good health.

2. What, if anything, do the USDA Food Guide Pyramid and the Oldways Diet Pyramids have in common?

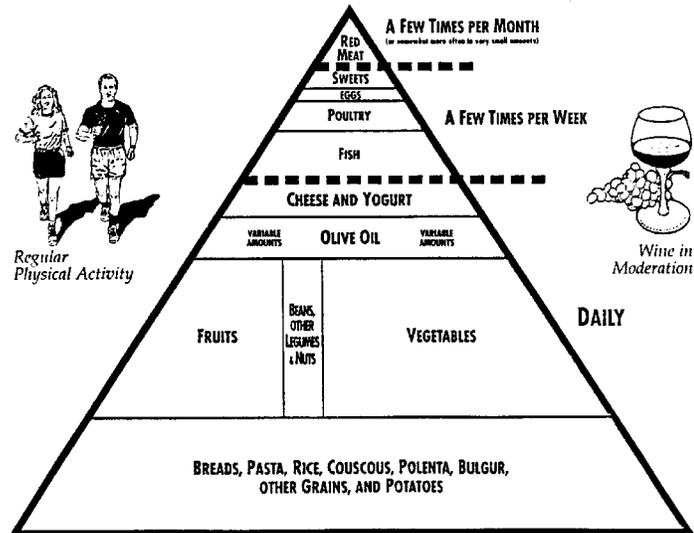
USDA's Food Guide Pyramid and the Oldways Diet Pyramids have much in common. All illustrate eating patterns consistent with current nutritional recommendations, and each can be used to plan diets consisting of different food items. Common emphases of all three Pyramids include eating plenty of grain products and vegetables and fruits.

Physical activity, moderation in consumption of alcoholic beverages, and enjoyment of meals are healthy lifestyle factors emphasized by the Oldways Pyramids and the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.

USDA's Food Guide Pyramid is based on American eating patterns. Flexibility in food choices is an important objective of the USDA Food Guide. Thus, a person can easily choose to eat "Mediterranean," "Asian," or "Latin American style" within the framework of the USDA Food Pyramid.

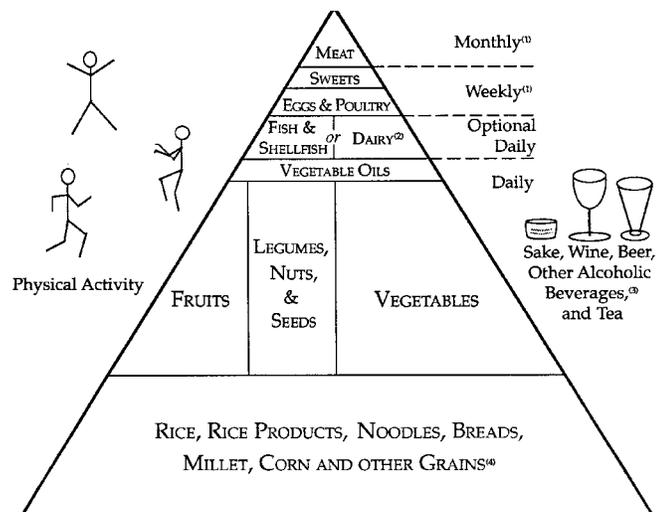
In fact, several other pyramids have been developed. The Puerto Rican Pyramid, the Vegetarian Pyramid, and the "Soul Food" Pyramid all use the USDA Food Guide Pyramid framework but emphasize

Mediterranean Diet Pyramid



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Asian Diet Pyramid



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a more selective range of foods. These pyramids, used in conjunction with the guidance offered by USDA, can help the public choose foods that fit a specific ethnic or cultural diet.

3. How do the Oldways Diet Pyramids differ from the USDA Food Guide Pyramid?

The Oldways Diet Pyramids were designed to illustrate proportions rather than specific types and amounts of food. Detailed information on serving sizes and numbers of servings of foods are not provided. In addition, levels of total fat and saturated fat are not specified.

Since they represent cultural eating patterns, the Oldways Pyramids include a more limited range of foods than the USDA Food Guide Pyramid. A major difference between the Mediterranean and Asian Diet Pyramids and the USDA Food Guide Pyramid is their distinction between plant and animal proteins. The Oldways Pyramids group plant-based proteins—legumes, soybeans, nuts, and seeds—separately from animal proteins found in meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy products.

Red meat is included only occasionally in both the Mediterranean and Asian Pyramids (a few times a month or less), while poultry and eggs appear slightly more often. The Asian Diet Pyramid contains limited dairy products, considering them “optional” and to be eaten in their lowfat forms only. Another important distinction among the Pyramids concerns fat. Fat in the Oldways Pyramids comes largely from vegetable oils high in monounsaturated fats, such as olive oil in the Mediterranean Pyramid and peanut oil in the Asian.

4. How can consumers use the USDA and Oldways Pyramids to make healthy food choices?

Neither USDA’s Food Guide Pyramid nor the Oldways Pyramids can convey all that consumers need to know to make food choices for a healthy diet. USDA’s Food Guide Pyramid is accompanied by additional information, such as the number of servings from each food group appropriate for people of different age, sex, and calorie needs.

To help consumers become healthier, USDA is participating in **The Dietary Guidelines Alliance**, a public-private partnership of health organizations, food industry associations, and the Federal Government. The mission is to motivate consumers to change their eating and activity patterns by providing them with positive, simple messages based on Dietary Guidelines principles.

In 1996, the Alliance kicked off its “It’s All About You” campaign to help consumers integrate Dietary Guidelines principles into their day-to-day lives. For more information, contact the International Food Information Council, 1100 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 430, Washington, DC 20036, and ask for *Reaching Consumers with Meaningful Health Messages: A Handbook for Nutrition and Food Communicators*. The Handbook will be available on the IFIC Web site in May at <http://ificinfo.health.org>.

The USDA Food Guide Pyramid (HG-252) is available on the CNPP Web site at <http://www.usda.gov/fcs/cnpp.htm> and is also available in bulk quantities from the Government Printing Office (202) 512-1800.