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Awareness and use of MyPlate guidelines in making food choices

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Abstract

Background/Objective: Over the past decades, the USDA created several guidelines to assist the public in making healthful food choices. In June 2011, the popular pyramid symbols (Food Guide Pyramid and MyPyramid) were replaced with MyPlate – a simple and practical guideline for making healthful food choices. This study aims to 1) assess consumers' awareness of the replacement of MyPyramid with MyPlate, and 2) determine whether MyPlate influenced people's dietary choices 4 months after the MyPlate symbol's release.

Methods: Fifty-one male and female participants, ages 18-34 years, with high school, associate's and bachelor's degree diplomas, were selected by convenience sampling. Participants manually completed an 11-question survey using yes/no or degree of liking rating. The relationship between participants' backgrounds, familiarity with MyPlate and MyPyramid guidelines, and the likelihood of use and influence on food selection was compared with participants' demographics.

Results: Eighty percent of the 51 participants were familiar with MyPyramid while 59% reported they had visited the website. About 50% of the participants reported they were aware that MyPlate replaced MyPyramid; but they were unfamiliar with MyPlate guidelines. About 50% of the participants would likely visit the MyPlate website. And, over half of the participants were unsure if MyPlate would influence their food choices while 43% thought it would.

Significance: MyPlate guidelines have been available to the public since June 2011 and findings of this study show that MyPlate guidelines influenced the food choices of at least 40% of the participants. It could be inferred that public awareness and use of MyPlate guidelines will grow over time.

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1. Introduction

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has provided Americans with food guides since 1916 in a perpetual endeavor to assist the public in making healthy food choices. The Food Guide

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Pyramid, introduced in 1992, became a well-recognized icon nation-wide and was used extensively in guiding consumers to make healthful diet decisions [1].

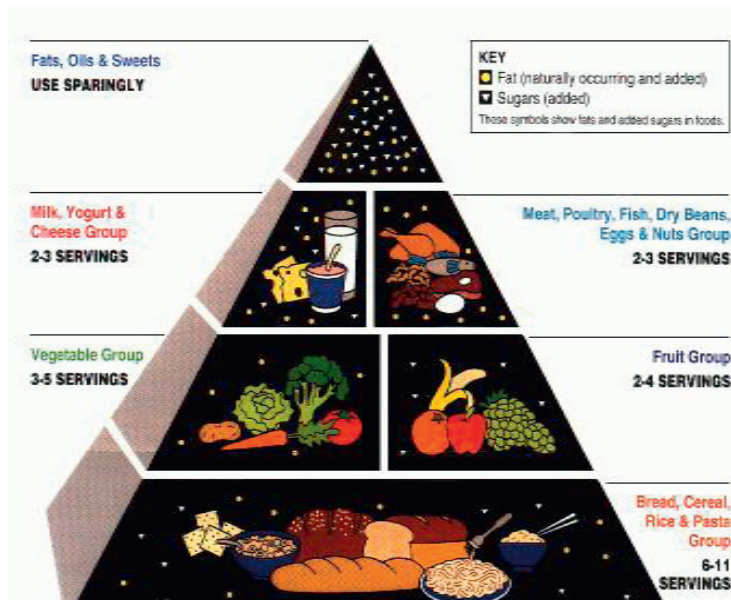


Fig.1. Food Guide Pyramid symbol [2] guides consumers in making daily food choices. It outlines what consumers can eat daily based on Dietary Guidelines. According to the USDA, it is not a rigid prescription but a general guide that lets consumers choose a healthful diet that's right for them.

When the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans were released, however, the USDA determined that it was time to update the food guide symbol to reflect the new guidelines [1]. Changes made to the original Food Guide Pyramid (Fig. 1) were based in part on consumer input from focus group studies conducted during the design and development stages of the food guide (MyPyramid, Fig. 2). In these focus groups, consumers indicated that they liked symbols including a representation of a man, as it helped them to feel connected to the message of the symbol. They also indicated that they preferred visual representations of action to signify exercise and physical activity as part of a healthy lifestyle along with a healthy diet. When questioned about retaining the pyramid shape for the updated icon, the majority of consumers interviewed indicated that retaining the pyramid shape would help to promote continuity of the message in changing from the previous icon to the updated one. However, others indicated that retaining the pyramid shape was not necessary because the original pyramid was ineffective or irrelevant, or that the shape simply wasn't "magical" in regard to communicating the messages needing to be conveyed [3]. The resulting icon was MyPyramid, which introduced physical activity, the oils food group, and the USDA's website to the icon [1].

With the release of the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, the USDA decided to update the food guide icon once again to reflect the newly-released guidelines. Again, focus groups of consumers were consulted to determine what characteristics would be most effective in a food guide icon. Research conducted by the USDA's Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion [4] indicated that though most consumers had learned the basic concepts taught by MyPyramid, a knowledge deficit remained in the concept areas of calories and portions. Consumer preference, as indicated in the focus groups, favored a plate-shaped icon, as it conveyed a positive message regarding healthy eating patterns. Consumers also

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