

Filling MyPlate for a Healthy Eating Plan

By Janet Hackert, Nutrition Specialist

For a long time the U.S. Department of Agriculture has been studying what Americans need to eat to be healthy and creating a symbol to illustrate their recommendations. On June 2, they revealed the newest symbol, MyPlate, to visually represent the 2010 recommendations.

This symbol has morphed over the years. From 1916 – 1930's, there was "Food for Young Children" and "How to Select Food." In the 1940's it was the Basic Seven. And from 1956-1970's, the Food for Fitness, A Daily Food Guide showed the basic four, and "4-4-3-2" was what children were taught as a reminder to eat the proper proportions of fruits and vegetables, breads and cereal foods, milk, and meat, respectively. In the later '70's and into the '80's, moderation and calorie levels were included. In 1992 with a modification in 2005, the Food Guide Pyramid and MyPyramid showed the proportions needed from each food group for healthy eating, but were still hard to translate from the triangle shape into daily food consumption.

The 2011 MyPlate includes recommendations for eating a variety of foods from the five major food groups, but in a format that should prove easier to make healthy food choices at each meal. It takes the proportions and colors used in MyPyramid, but puts them on a place setting. The plate is divided into four sections. The largest segment represents vegetables – no surprise there. With plant-based foods providing such important nutrients for good health, the smaller fruit segment joins the vegetable segment to comprise half the food on a plate at a meal. Opposite these, the grains group is another large segment to insure plenty of fiber, B-vitamins and other essential nutrients grains, especially whole grains, provide. The fourth segment represents protein foods. This provides another important nutrient for good health, but in smaller proportion than many Americans are currently choosing. A small circle to the top right of the plate is a reminder of dairy options, milk being the most common.

Seeing the symbol, it is easy to imagine what the healthy choices will be as we fill our plates. Follow the pattern on the MyPlate symbol, choose lower fat/lower sugar/lower sodium options and see the effect it has. The goal is to make a nutritious eating plan easier. With the busy lives Americans lead, we already have so many responsibilities that eating for good health could seem burdensome. But as First Lady Michelle Obama said in a USDA press release, "It's tough to be a nutritionist, too. But we do have time to take a look at our kids' plates. As long as they're half full of fruits and vegetables, and paired with lean proteins, whole grains and low-fat dairy, we're golden. That's how easy it is."

For more information on the latest recommendations, go to www.choosemyplate.gov or contact me, Janet Hackert, Regional Nutrition Specialist, at 660-425-6434.

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