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Use the Food Guide Pyramid to Eat Better

By: Coni Jo Dobbels, Director of Nutrition Services

Low-carb? Low-fat? With all the diet choices on the market today, it can sometimes be difficult to decide what to eat. Summer is a perfect time to take advantage of wonderful fresh produce and evaluate good and poor food choices.

The Food Guide Pyramid is a guide created to help people know what and how much to eat every day. It recommends:

- **Grains, especially whole grains, bread, cereal, rice and pasta:** six to 11 servings;
- **Vegetables:** three to five servings;
- **Fruits:** two to four servings;
- **Milk, yogurt and cheese:** two to three servings;
- **Meat, poultry, fish, dry beans eggs and nuts:** two to three servings;
- **Fats, oils and sweets:** use sparingly.

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Servings can sometimes be difficult to understand. For the grains category, a serving includes one slice of bread, one cup of ready to eat cereal or one-half cup of cooked cereal, rice or pasta. A vegetable serving is one cup of raw leafy vegetables, one-half cup of cooked or raw vegetables (that are not leafy) or three-fourths cup vegetable juice. Fruit servings constitute one medium apple, banana, orange or pear, one-half cup chopped, cooked or canned fruit or three-fourths cup of fruit juice. For milk, yogurt and cheese a serving is one cup of milk or yogurt, one and a half ounces of natural cheese (cheddar) or two ounces of processed cheese (American). The meat group would include two to three ounces of lean meat, poultry or fish.

Food labels can sometimes misguide a person when evaluating serving sizes. Often food labels give serving sizes that are larger than what the food pyramid recommends.

Eating a variety of grains, especially whole grains, combined with fruits and vegetables is important. Grains provide vitamins, minerals, carbohydrates (starch and dietary fiber) and other substances that are beneficial for good health. Grains are also low in fat unless fat is added when the grains are processed. The high fiber in grains also helps people to feel fuller after eating them. It is best to obtain fiber from whole grains, fruits and vegetables, instead of through supplements.

Fruits and vegetables are also an important part of a daily diet because they can prevent many chronic diseases and promote healthy bowel function. They also provide essential vitamins and minerals. Different kinds of fruits and vegetables provide different vitamins and minerals, so eating a large variety are beneficial. For instance, baked potatoes and cooked greens are good sources of potassium, while citrus fruits, broccoli, and leafy greens are rich in vitamin C. Any form of vegetables – fresh, frozen, canned, dried and even juices – provides nutrition. It is important, however, to be aware of the sugar content.

A nutritious diet will improve your overall general health. Become familiar with the Food Guide Pyramid and choose wisely.

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