

## San Francisco Chronicle

April 20, 2005

### **New food pyramid difficult to digest Abstract update requires Web access for personal plan**

[Carol Ness, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

After four years of work and \$2.4 million in spending, the U.S. government ripped the lid of secrecy Tuesday off its new symbol for healthy eating.

Replacing the beloved but ignored food pyramid is ... a new pyramid, a tipped-over version of the old, with all mentions of actual food stripped out. A major new design feature is a sporty figure climbing steep steps up the side of the pyramid, with the slogan: "Steps to a Healthier You."

Unlike the old pyramid, which was designed to represent government nutrition advice in one quick bite, this version requires an interactive Web site to provide information.

"The symbol is meant to increase awareness, but the education is in the accompanying materials," said U.S. Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns, showing off the pyramid in Washington, D.C.

High interest in the new pyramid on Tuesday virtually paralyzed [www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov), the Web site at the heart of the government's new Food Guidance System. The pyramid is designed to drive consumers to the site, which offers personalized eating plans.

The food industry responded enthusiastically, with promises to put the new symbol on product labels as soon as possible. Exactly which products can carry the symbol wasn't immediately clear, but Eric Hentges, USDA head of nutrition policy and promotion, said, "We expect the food industry to patrol itself."

Nutritionists offered split opinions on the new pyramid. Some applauded the personalization of the new Web site, while others thought the highly abstract new pyramid missed an opportunity to provide direct advice on what --

and what not -- to eat.

The new symbol was designed to reflect the government's latest advice on healthy eating, compiled in the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, released in January. They are the most complicated guidelines to date, adding an exercise component and setting calorie levels for people of various ages for the first time. The guidelines made 23 recommendations, with an additional 18 for children, the elderly and other groups.

The impossibility of fitting all those recommendations into one symbol is the reason the new pyramid is conceptual, rather than specific, Hentges said.

That's also the point that drew the most immediate criticism.

The old pyramid had horizontal sections that visually told people what to eat: grains got a broad band across the bottom, meaning eat lots; fats and sugar were squeezed into the tiny tip, meaning eat little.

The new pyramid features vertical bands of varying widths and colors starting at the tip and widening at the base. The idea is that each band represents a different food group, and the width tells people how much of each group to eat. But, without going to the Web site, there are no words to tell consumers that the wide orange band means grains, while the skinny yellow one is oils.

Also missing is any information differentiating healthy whole grain cereals from sugary snacks, or the more beneficial olive oil from harmful saturated fat.

The figure climbing the stairs promotes exercise and is key to the government's concept: Take the first steps toward good health.

The symbol is intended to interest consumers in [www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov), where they can enter their age, gender and exercise level and get an eating plan that fits their needs -- one of 12 eating plans or pyramids.

Another feature lets people track what they're eating and shows them where they're running amok, nutritionally.

Johanns said the pyramid conveys "moderation -- you can eat a lot of different foods but in moderation. Then exercise -- even a small amount will make a difference. The key is to get started. And get onto the Web site. It is outstanding."

Critics, however, pointed out that those messages were entirely abstract.

Noting the rainbow colors and Spandex-clad figure, food consultant Clark Wolfe said the pyramid makes it look as though "all you need to do to be healthy in America is be gay and exercise."

More seriously, Marion Nestle, nutrition professor at New York University, took one look at the new pyramid and asked: "Where's the food?"

"There's no 'eat less' message here," Nestle said. "There's nothing about soda or snacks or about how many times you should eat."

USDA officials said that if people track their eating on [www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov), they will eat better and eat less. But Nestle said poor, uneducated people are both more likely to be overweight and to lack computer access.

"I would say this is a clear win for the food industry," Nestle said. "It's a clear win for personal responsibility. You need to know a great deal to make this thing work for you."

At UC Berkeley, nutritionist Joanne Ikeda disagreed. Having seen many government nutrition plans come and go, she was surprised to find the new plan excited her.

"I think this is the USDA moving into the 21st century," Ikeda said. "I think the hook is personalization, and that hasn't been there in the past." She's found that her own students become intensely involved when they track their own eating habits as part of her class.

Industry can't wait to get started. The Grocery Manufacturers of America announced plans for new labels and new products tailored to the pyramid even before it was announced.

"It's going to be a benchmark," said Alison Kretser, GMA nutritionist and policy director.

In the end, consumers will decide that. Of 28 Chronicle Two Cents readers who offered their opinions on whether the new pyramid would change their eating habits, only two said maybe; the rest said no.

"If consumers have not altered their diet by now, nothing from the government will make a difference," wrote Susan Jackson, of San Francisco's Sunset District in a representative e-mail. "Wake up and smell the tomatoes."

---

#### Anatomy of the pyramid

Colors represent food groups and oils, and widths of the bands offer a general guide to portions

Grains (orange)

Vegetables (green)

Fruits (red)

Oils (yellow)

Milk (blue)

Meat & beans (purple)

Figure represents the importance of daily physical activity

Source: Department of Agriculture

*E-mail Carol Ness at [cness@sfchronicle.com](mailto:cness@sfchronicle.com).*