

Health

Groups, pyramid or plate? Food guides are designed to help you build a varied, balanced diet.

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A good serve

Remember the five basic food groups from the 1970s? You were supposed to choose from five categories to ensure you were eating a balanced diet with all your essential vitamins and minerals. There were fruit and vegetables; bread and cereals; proteins (meat, fish, chicken and eggs); dairy foods; and fats and oils.

Then came the food pyramid (created in 1982 by the Australian Nutrition Foundation, now Nutrition Australia). Divided into three segments, it showed which foods you were meant to “eat most” at the base of the pyramid – vegetables, fruit, breads and grains. Next, you were advised to “eat moderately” foods in the middle – lean meat, fish and dairy. Lastly, at the apex, were those items to “eat in small amounts”, namely sugar, butter, margarine and oils.

Now there’s the food plate model. The latest but least well-known guide – developed by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing in 1994 – looks like a dinner plate divided into larger wedges (showing vegetables and legumes; bread, rice, pasta and noodles) and smaller wedges (fruit, dairy, protein).

Food-selection guides, which have been around since the early 1900s, are tools designed to help people select food for good health. They vary in their complexity and purpose. The pyramid, for example, has vegetarian, Asian, Mediterranean and Pacific Rim variations, each reflecting that region’s food preferences. In the Mediterranean version, pasta, bread, couscous and polenta make up the majority of the diet, with olive oil and vegetables consumed daily and meat to be eaten only a few times a month; the Asian pyramid lists noodles among the staples.

All such schemes have their limitations. For a start, foods don’t always fit into one neat group. Take nuts. No one can quite agree where to place nuts, which could go into the fats group (being more than 50 per cent fat) or the protein group (with 15 per cent protein).

Legumes are another headache. Are they a vegetable or a protein? After all, we eat green peas as a vegetable but soy beans are used in protein substitutes such as soy steaks and tofu burgers. The food plate model (part of the latest *Australian Guide To Healthy Eating*, see www.health.gov.au) places them in both groups.

Some guides include fats as a food group; others say we already over-eat them and lump them with potato chips, biscuits and soft drinks, to be eaten in small amounts only.

So, can you eat by them? Guides are useful to assess your overall diet. You can check whether you’re eating enough vegetables and fruits, or having too much meat and dairy, and how much variety you’re getting. But it can be difficult not to get bogged down when you’re planning a meal. For that, you still need to think moderation and balance, keep meals light and use less fat and sugar.

HOW TO... *fight a cold*

“Ginger, chilli, garlic and horseradish are all traditional ‘warming’ remedies that will speed you through a cold,” say naturopath Mim Beim and nutrition consultant Jan Castorina in their book *Help Yourself*. “Fluids, especially if they’re hot and clear, help to mobilise the lymphatic system, which carries disease-fighting white blood cells.” They also help to thin mucus. Drink up to three litres of fluids daily but ditch alcohol, sugar and dairy. Try this recipe from naturopath Deborah Cooper: mix 1 tsp each cayenne pepper, ginger, cinnamon and cloves. Add ¼ tsp of this mix to black tea.



Tip of the week

Helen Tardent, author of *Beautiful Pilates* (Lantern, \$39.95)



“The beauty of Pilates mat work is that you can practise it at any time. It is the ultimate in developing strength and increasing flexibility. The spine twist stretch is a good exercise to start with at home. Sit tall, with hip bones and pubic bones square and your legs stretched out in front of you. Bend your right knee and place your right foot on the floor on the outside of your left knee. Place your left arm in front of your right thigh and put your right hand on the floor behind you. Press your left arm and right leg against each other to facilitate the stretch. Breathe in and out slowly six times. Repeat twice each side.”