



Pyramid pandemonium

Over the past two decades, messages about how to stay healthy and fit have emerged as an endless set of changing guidelines or opinions. Last week's news presented a multitude of seemingly contradictory messages.

On Tuesday the U.S. Department of Agriculture replaced the Food Guide Pyramid with a new and theoretically improved "MyPyramid" aimed at winning the war on obesity. On Wednesday the Journal of the American Medical Association published a report indicating that being overweight was not associated with excess deaths in 2000.

Being either underweight or obese, however, were both associated with increased mortality -- obesity with about 112,000 excess deaths and underweight with about 34,000. This study by Katherine Flegal, senior research scientist at the National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, also indicates that for some unknown reason, the relative risk associated with obesity seems to have

decreased since 1975, based on the National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys.

Using a height-to-weight ratio called the body mass index, underweight is defined as a BMI less than 18.5; overweight is a BMI of 25 to 30; obese is a BMI of 30 or greater. Calculate your BMI on the National Institutes for Health Web site: nhlbisupport.com/bmi.

Another study has added fuel to the contradiction bonfire. The Centers for Disease Control lowered its estimate of deaths due to excess pounds from 365,000, reported in January, to about 25,814. This dropped the January obesity risk from second to seventh among the nation's preventable causes of death.

Question: Do Americans need to lose a significant amount of fat and weight to stay healthy?

Answer: A fair amount of research indicates that overall health depends on level of fitness, not a single number on the scale. To this extent, MyPyramid is on the right track. Exercise

and physical activity are strongly emphasized. The new system promotes exercise in many forms for at least 30 to 90 minutes a day.

Q: Is MyPyramid the weapon necessary to keep the girth of Americans reasonable?

A: Although some are praising the individualized pyramid, others with equivalent credentials scorn it. MyPyramid is not as simple as it initially appears, and this controversy is not likely to end soon. During the next few months, the arguments will enforce the concept that nutrition "experts" can't agree on what's best.

MyPyramid recognizes that individuals do not have identical nutrient and energy needs. But it might be trying to go too far toward playing the role of dietitian and nutritionist in providing personalized food guides.

Next week: "Health Options" will explore concerns with the MyPyramid approach.

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