



Diverse population needs confound MyPyramid.gov

The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently released Food Guide Pyramid Version 2 in an online version called MyPyramid.gov. The most important messages are to get plenty of exercise and eat a wide variety of wholesome foods in moderate amounts from each food group and within each group. The USDA's pyramid food plans are the only ones scientifically based on eating foods to meet nutrient needs.

If you don't have a computer to get at the online version, don't fret. The practical messages above might be all you really need to know to stay healthy. After all, the growing number of octogenarians didn't have the benefit of the Food Guide Pyramid or computers for the majority of their lives, and they still met their nutrient needs.

If you do explore MyPyramid.gov, keep in mind Clifford Stoll's statement in his 1995 book, "Silicon Snake Oil": "Computers hide mistakes in logic while sanctifying information with an aura of truth."

MyPyramid.gov attempts to

serve as an individualized eating guide to "maintain your current weight" or to lead you "to gradually achieving and maintaining a healthy weight." The efforts by the USDA to provide a simple user-friendly personalized nutrition plan are laudable. But after spending more than 40 hours exploring MyPyramid.gov, we do not believe that all of the complexities of this daunting task have been adequately taken into account.

If it were easy to design a weight-maintenance or weight-loss system that met nutrient needs for a population, there wouldn't be hundreds of weight-loss plans on the market. So many diets exist because of the complexity of obesity and its causes. Add to this the enormous number of possible food choices and the 50 or more nutrients contained in foods, and the term "daunting task" is an understatement.

MyPyramid.gov must make many physiological assumptions. The result is nutritional guidance that is too simplistic and generalized in some aspects yet too complicated in others.

For example, based on information about your age, sex and activity level, a diet pattern with a particular calorie content is generated for you. But this option does not ask for body weight. Because body weight is a major determinant of calorie and protein needs, the recommended amount of food could be too much or too little. A disclaimer acknowledges that this is only an estimate, but many people will likely miss this statement.

Another part of the site, MyPyramid Tracker, allows input of weight and height along with foods consumed to provide a nutrient analysis of your diet. We found this to be too complicated and time-consuming. Consequently, there is great risk for the "garbage in, garbage out" type problem.

MyPyramid.gov strikes us as a test version that needs thorough testing and revision before it can hold up to public use.

Alan Titchenal, Ph.D, CNS and Joannie Dobbs, Ph.D, CNS
are nutritionists in the Department of Human Nutrition, Food and Animal Sciences,
College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, UH-Manoa.
Dr. Dobbs also works with the University Health Service.
