

Health

Designers' challenge: Redo the Food Pyramid

We asked several noted designers, and students, how they would redesign the USDA's new Food Pyramid. And the shape wasn't restricted to a pyramid. ■ Here is what they came up with; their ideas should give you other ways to help remember what should and should not (*hold the oils*) be eaten.

By Lynne Perri
USA TODAY

When the U.S. Department of Agriculture introduced a new Food Pyramid in April, its mission was twofold: to create a more simple diagram of what Americans should eat daily, and to accompany that with an in-depth website that could be personalized to fit individual needs.

The response has been tremendous, says Eric Hentges, executive director of the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. The website (MyPyramid.gov) has received 518 million hits as of the week ending June 5. Hentges describes the new pyramid, the companion poster and the website as part of a three-year drive to educate the public on the value of developing healthful eating plans and maintaining physical activity (30, 60 or 90 minutes of exercise a day).

Hentges also says the center has received enough feedback to know to speed up two other goals: translating the material into Spanish and creating elementary-age materials in time for the new school year.

But what about the diagram? The USDA tested it with focus groups, who were shown examples with and without a figure doing a physical activity. Not all the designs tested were pyramids, but the public preferred that shape, spokesman John Webster says.

We tried looking at the same guidelines in new configurations, without focus groups and for the fun of it, to see how best to remember what we should be eating.



Building pyramids, from the 1940s up

The evolution of the food guidelines from the U.S. Department of Agriculture shows how both proportions and shapes have changed over the years.

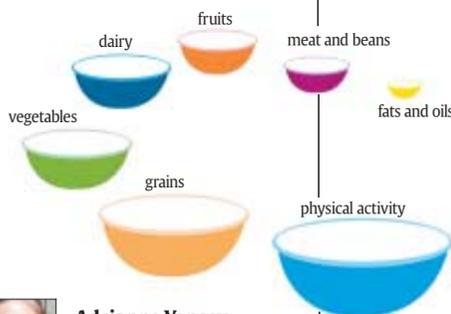
The 2005 pyramid is the first with a companion website. Mypyramid.gov allows you to track what you eat and how much physical activity you've done and then advises you on what you need to decrease or increase.

Experts say everything counts when it comes to physical activity, including walking and gardening.



What college kids see

Tony Brock, assistant professor of graphic design at North Carolina State University, College of Design, had his students research the history of the chart and think about its application. Would it work on a cereal box? With a broad age range? Does it need a legend?



Adrienne Yancey

Junior graphic design major at North Carolina State, doing freelance design work this summer.

She took a nutrition class recently and learned that portion size is key. "I thought if you actually visualized how much you are eating, that would help." She considered a plate but settled on bowls, with colors representing the different food groups. Yancey helps her mother, a kindergarten teacher, in her classes and sees weight problems in even young children. "I'm really interested in educating people" with the food guidelines, she says.



Colleen Simon

Junior graphic design major at North Carolina State, interning this summer at Frank Harmon Architect in Raleigh, N.C.

She and her fellow students turned the information into a pie chart. "As a joke, I added a fork and knife, and said, 'Now you can relate it to food.'" She thought her idea might effectively illustrate the points for adults and children, especially after she added photographs. She has since become a fan of MyPyramid.gov. "I've always tried to eat healthy, but I'd never realized how much dairy you need. In the pyramid, it's harder to distinguish the different sections."



Nigel Holmes

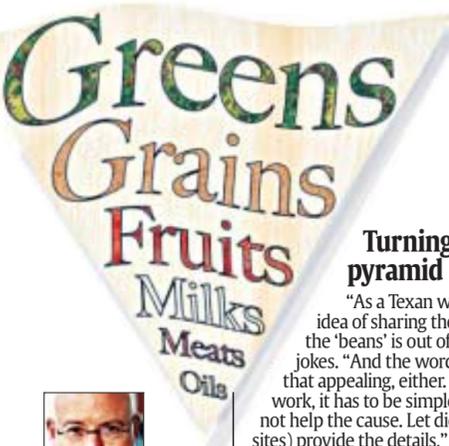
Creates animations and diagrams about serious subjects, from global warming to U.S. deaths in Iraq, and lighter fare such as how to make a grilled-cheese sandwich or how to wave like a royal. He is founder of Explanation Graphics and former graphics director of *Time*, and has done graphics for the BBC, Ford Motor Co. and American Express. His work has appeared in many magazines, including *Esquire*, *The New Yorker* and *Rolling Stone*. His new book is called *Wordless Diagrams* (Bloomsbury USA).

To the letter

"My graphic simply attempts to clarify the government's 2005 guidelines, showing the five food groups in the correct (OK, slightly rounded off) proportions you need for a healthy diet," Holmes says. "This raises the question: Why have a graphic at all if this is all it can do? The answer is that the proportions are important; they are the basis of a balanced diet." He decided that dividing the food groups into four squares, one of which is further divided, makes a grid that is easily remembered. Subliminal points: Vegetables and Grains are at the top, so you see a VG ("very good").

Small tags confirm the actual percentages. These could be clicked on in the Web version, and a horizontal pullout graphic would show more detailed information about each group. When the graphic is small, like a logo, there is a simplified version that relies on colors and letters for its message.

"Note: This is a food grid. It does not address lack of exercise, TV watching, smoking, drinking, drug-taking, work-related stress, guns, driving while using cellphones, extreme sports or any other activity that may be harmful to your health," Holmes says.



Turning the pyramid on its head

"As a Texan who likes his steak, the idea of sharing the meat portion with the 'beans' is out of the question," Black jokes. "And the word 'vegetables' is not that appealing, either. For this message to work, it has to be simple, and qualifiers do not help the cause. Let diet books (and websites) provide the details."

Black's design: "A simple, graphic, inverted pyramid to indicate priority. It can be used in a variety of sizes and applications with color and imagery added in the larger versions." It's also an "antidote for bottom-heavy America."

"Given the assignment to redesign the pyramid, the first instinct of a graphic designer is to look for icons that could represent the food groups," he says. "But the images seem a bit abstract: A chicken leg doesn't immediately say 'meat.' It's like the icons in computer software. Without the label, you're often lost."

"So why not just use words? That might send a faster message. The first question is: Which words? 'Grains' is good, although Atkins adherents might object to the conclusion that it's OK to fill up on bread. 'Vegetables' is a problem. No one likes to be told to 'eat your vegetables.' So, let's call them 'greens.'"

"And the big news of the new pyramid is much greater emphasis on vegetables and fruit in the diet. So perhaps we should make this point by moving greens to the top."

He says the problem with the government's redesigned pyramid is "that it is trying to do too much. A pyramid . . . should indicate hierarchy or quantity. Turning it on its side, it's no longer a pyramid."

"Then, the little man (or, possibly, alien) running up the stairs is just confusing. He is trying to make the point that diet is not enough; you have to exercise. But that is really a separate thought. Most Americans can't handle both ideas at the same time."



Roger Black

Co-founder of Danilo Black, has been art director of *Newsweek*, *The New York Times* and *Rolling Stone*. He has redesigned a number of publications and websites around the world. His work has appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Houston Chronicle* and *Nintendo Power*.



Lucie Lacava

Design consultant and president of Lacava Design Inc., which she founded in 1992. She has redesigned more than 50 publications in the USA, Canada and Europe. She has received more than 100 awards internationally and is currently working on a redesign of *The Baltimore Sun*. She is a past president of the Society for News Design.

Photo-friendly

"I always try to look at things from different perspectives and different dimensions. I thought the plate idea was closer and more functional, but at the same time, I didn't want to abandon the pyramid," Lacava says. "I thought about a stack of plates so it could look like a pyramid from the side if they were blocks of different food elements." She used photos "because they're more realistic. I thought the colors would be difficult, but if you see the lettuce, it will remind you of the green vegetables. . . . I decided to narrow it down to one (photo) per group so it would be just symbolic."

Lacava also noted that this new pyramid could be adapted to fit religious or vegetarian needs. Photos could be substituted with images of the special diet equivalents; for instance, beans or tofu would go in the meat section.