New Straits Times : 12 November 2006 THE US Department of Agriculture (USDA) launched in 1991 a powerful and enduring icon &#65533; the Food Guide Pyramid. It conveyed the elements of a healthy diet. The Pyramid was taught in schools, appeared in countless media articles and brochures, and was plastered on cereal boxes and food labels.

Increasingly, more and more people took elements of the pyramid guide, and made it into a mantra, like "fat is bad for you". "Low fat"and "fat free" became the new "cool language". Butter was evil. Margarine was in. Eggs were demonised. Carbohydrates were welcomed and encouraged irrespective of source and type.

THE NEW REALITY

While we may debate about how closely the public followed the advice of the pyramid, the net effect was an increase in obesity, heart disease and diabetes!

There was a need for a rethink. In the year 2000, the guidelines were reassessed. That too was not helpful.

So with much fanfare, the USDA, the very agency that created the Food Pyramid icon, recently retired the "old" Food Guide Pyramid and replaced it with MyPyramid &#65533; the new symbol.

The new symbol is, in some ways, the old Pyramid turned on its side. It took four years and cost US$2.4 million.

TURNING ON ITS SIDE

The new pyramid in the words of the USDA spokesperson "turns the pyramid on its side". The new recommendations also overturned the "one-size-fits-all" approach of the past and has 12 eating plans.

You may want to log on a listen to an audio from the USDA at: http://www.mypyramid.gov/global_nav/media_animation-presentation_eng_pc.html

Six swathes of colour sweep from the apex of MyPyramid to the base:

Orange for grains, green for vegetables, red for fruits, a teeny band of yellow for oils, blue for milk, and purple for meat and beans.

Each stripe starts out as the same size, but they don&#65533;t end that way at the base. The widths suggest how much food a person should choose from each group.

A band of stairs running up the side of the Pyramid, with a little stick figure chugging up it, serves as a reminder of the importance of physical activity.

The good news is that this dismantles and buries the flawed Pyramid.

BREAKDOWN

The various food groups are placed on the pyramid with the full colour coded guide as follows:

Grains (orange):

There is a clear attempt to distinguish the whole grains from refined ones. While there is a reduction on serving sizes, this still remains the widest band.

Instead of emphasising "complex carbohydrates", a term used in the past that has little biological meaning, the new guidelines urge Americans to limit sugar intake and stress the benefits of whole grains.

Vegetables (green):

There is emphasis of fresh vegetables.

Fruits (red):

There is also emphasis on fresh fruits of all types.

Fats (yellow):

You are to be careful about your fat intake and choose your fats carefully.

The recommendation on dietary fats makes a clear break from the past, when all fats were considered bad. The guidelines now emphasise that intake of trans fats should be as low as possible and that saturated fat should be limited.

There is no longer an artificially low cap on fat intake.

The latest advice recommends getting between 20 and 35 per cent of daily calories from fats and recognises the potential health benefits of monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats.

Proteins (purple):

This represents lean meat and legumes.

The bad news is that the new symbol doesn&#65533;t convey enough information to help you make informed choices about your diet and long-term health.

And it continues to recommend foods that aren&#65533;t essential to good health, and may even be detrimental in the quantities included in MyPyramid.

NOT ALL GOOD

Others remain mired in the past. The guidelines suggest that it is fine to consume half of our grains as refined starch.

That

is a shame, since refined starches behave like sugar. They add empty calories, have adverse metabolic effects, and increase the risks of diabetes and heart diseases.

In terms of protein, the guidelines continue to lump together red meat, poultry, fish, and beans (including soy products).

We are supposed to judge these protein sources by their total fat content, "make choices that are lean, low-fat, or fat-free". This ignores the evidence that these foods have different types of fats.

It also overlooks mounting evidence that replacing red meat with a combination of fish, poultry, beans, and nuts offers numerous health benefits.

MILK?

The recommendation to drink three glasses of low-fat milk or eat three servings of other dairy products per day to prevent osteoporosis is another step in the wrong direction.

Of all the recommendations, this one represents the most radical change from current dietary patterns.

Three glasses of low-fat milk add more than 300 calories a day. This is a real issue for the millions of Americans who are trying to control their weight.

What&#65533;s more, millions of Americans are lactose intolerant, and even small amounts of milk or dairy products give them stomach ache, gas, or other problems.

- Building a Better Pyramid

Next week, we will take another look at the Harvard's Healthy Eating pyramid. It is, I think, a pyramid that probably makes the most sense.

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