

The Importance of MyPlate



By Marshall Matz

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The science of nutrition is complicated. The relationship between an individual nutrient and a specific disease is sure to spark a debate.

The cause of obesity, by comparison, is easier to explain. It is simple math. If you consume more calories than you burn up you will gain weight. Conversely, if you burn up more calories than you consume you will lose weight. (Note: A new study published in the New England Journal makes the point that specific dietary and lifestyle factors are independently associated with long-term weight gain.)

Since 1980, the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services has teamed up every five years to release the "Dietary Guidelines for Americans". Over the years, in an effort to be more specific it has gotten longer and more difficult for the average consumer to understand. Further, like its predecessor, "Dietary Goals for the United States" (issued by the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition) , its intent was to help minimize diet as a risk factor in the etiology of disease. Hence, it focuses on specific nutrients rather than foods and the entire diet.

The release last month of the "My Plate" by First Lady Michelle Obama and Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack comes not a moment too soon. Obesity has reached an epidemic proportion in the United States. Our children have accelerated disease patterns and are getting diabetes at earlier and earlier ages. "MyPlate," as the Secretary said, "is an uncomplicated symbol to help remind people to think about their food choices in order to lead healthier lifestyles."



The message of "MyPlate" is twofold:

1. Eat a balanced meal with half the plate being filled by fruits and vegetables, paired with lean proteins, whole grains and low fat dairy.
2. Balance your calories with your level of activity.

If we follow this advice, to quote the First Lady, "We're golden."

The importance of the second point (above) was underscored by a new study that received front page attention by the New York Times on May 23. It deserves your attention as well. The study reports, in short, that the average American has decreased their calorie expenditure at work by 142 calories per day. This may not sound like much but it is quite significant.

"If we're going to try to get to the root of what's causing the obesity epidemic, work-related physical activity needs to be in the discussion," said Dr. Timothy S. Church, the study's lead researcher at Pennington Biomedical Research Center in Baton Rouge, La. When you combine the trend at work with children who go home after school to get on the computer instead of heading to the play-ground and the increase in portion sizes the picture becomes clear. It is why the First Lady says "Let's Move."

Budgeting calories is not much different than budgeting dollars, except there is no credit card. As Americans burn up fewer calories each day, we must consume calories with greater nutrient value and "waste" fewer calories.

What does it take to burn off the 142 calories a day we are not burning up at work? "MyPlate" includes these examples:

How many calories does physical activity use?

A 154-pound man (5' 10") will use up about the number of calories listed doing each activity below. Those who weigh more will use more calories, and those who weigh less will use fewer. The calorie values listed include both calories used by the activity and the calories used for normal body functioning.

	Approximate calories used by a 154 pound man	
	In 1 hour	In 30 minutes
Moderate physical activities:		
Hiking	370	185
Light gardening/yard work	330	165
Dancing	330	165
Golf (walking and carrying clubs)	330	165
Bicycling (less than 10 miles per hour)	290	145
Walking (3 ½ miles per hour)	280	140
Weight training (general light workout)	220	110
Stretching	180	90
Vigorous physical activities:		
	In 1 hour	In 30 minutes
Running/jogging (5 miles per hour)	590	295
Bicycling (more than 10 miles per hour)	590	295
Swimming (slow freestyle laps)	510	255
Aerobics	480	240
Walking (4 ½ miles per hour)	460	230
Heavy yard work (chopping wood)	440	220
Weight lifting (vigorous effort)	440	220
Basketball (vigorous)	440	220

The good news is that it does not take radical surgery to make a difference. According to many experts, a modest exercise routine that burns off 100 or an extra 150 calories a day, combined with reducing calories by an equal amount can make a difference in your weight and how you feel.

As obesity is now the most important nutrition challenge facing the general population, the nutrition education message needs to be clarified, consistent and sharpened. Industry, government, and schools should all build upon MyPlate and more directly link calorie consumption to physical activity. Here are some other ideas:

- Let's try putting computers in the school cafeterias and the supermarkets so that consumers can plug in a food and find out what it will take to burn off the number of calories in that food.
- Perhaps food labels should devote valuable space to emphasizing the relationship between calories and activity and delete the amount of thiamin, riboflavin, magnesium and phosphorus.

- The Treasury Department should finally publish its pending regulations on the labeling of alcoholic beverages. (It is the only source of calories not currently labeled.)

Some people will ignore even clear and consistent information. But at the moment there is so much information touting so many different nutrition issues and theories it makes it easier to ignore all nutrition education messages. If the public feels that the experts don't agree on anything, it is an easy excuse to stay on the couch and keep the donuts coming.

To complement the MyPlate initiative, the USDA's Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion will launch a series of seven campaigns to promote healthier eating. The campaigns will begin in September 2011, end in December 2013 and will focus on simple goals like enjoying food but eating less of it. These campaigns will expand upon the MyPlate graphic by giving Americans clear, specific and attainable goals which will help to reduce obesity and are the way to go. Prohibiting the advertising of food products is not the solution, and neither is limiting the use of SNAP benefits for only certain foods.

In 2009, former Senators George McGovern (D-SD) and Bob Dole (R-KS) called for a second White House Conference Nutrition to focus on obesity. As they noted, "While it is not the government's role to tell people what to eat, the government has an important role to play by providing basic information." A White House Conference is an idea whose time has come and the First Lady has the unique credibility necessary to bring together all of the stakeholders.

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