

# Pyramid Schemes

Food for thought on Canada's guide to healthy eating

by MADELEINE GREY

Most of us have heard of it. Some may even have it posted on their fridge. But does *Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating* have any real impact on what you and your family eat?

That's what Health Canada is mulling over as it revamps our food guide — that friendly, familiar rainbow that encourages us to “enjoy a variety of foods from each food group.”

When it was released in 1992, it broke the mould (and still does) in terms of graphics, standing out as the only national food guide in the world with a rainbow shape versus the more common pyramid or pie plate graphic. But by March 2006, we'll have a new guide, and according to Janet Pronk, acting director of Health Canada's Office of Nutrition Policy and Promotion, it may change shape and could include more food groups. Most importantly, the new food guide aims to get the healthy eating message out, loud and clear.

But will Canadian families digest it?

“If everybody in Canada followed the food guide, we'd have a much healthier nation,” says Kamloops, BC, dietitian Sheryl Giudici. “I use it every day at home and at work. It's one of the best tools I have as a nutritionist.”

While she's clearly enthusiastic about the guide, Giudici is also realistic: “Only 20 percent of Canadians follow the food guide. Seventy-five percent of adults don't eat the minimum amount of recommended servings of vegetables and fruit.”

Numbers like these, compounded by rising obesity rates, have people



Broccoli and Cheddar Strata

like Health Canada's Pronk “troubled,” but she stands by the science and research that are the guide's foothold. In other words, it's not the message, it's the medium that's causing the problem.

Toronto parent Leah Macpherson says her family “follows the food guide” — albeit loosely. She doesn't have a copy of it in her home nor does she know where she can get one. (Psst! *Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating* is available online at [hc-sc.gc.ca](http://hc-sc.gc.ca).)

Macpherson knows the basic message: that she and her family should eat from the four food groups. She also knows that they need to eat more grains and fruits and vegetables. What baffles her is the number of servings the guide suggests.

She's not the only one. Lynn Roblin is an Oakville, Ont., dietitian who was part of the creative team that designed the current food guide. “We wanted to communicate that grains

and vegetables and fruit need to be emphasized. Visually, I believe we did get that message across. However, many people were initially intimidated by the serving range.”

Unfortunately, they still are. According to Pronk, the feedback Health Canada has received is that many people do not know where they fit in the serving range. The guide calls for five to 12 servings of grains, and five to 10 servings of vegetables and fruits, per day. If you turn the guide over, it states that “young children can choose the lower number of servings, while male teenagers can go to the higher number. Most other people can choose servings somewhere in between.” Huh?

Serving information becomes less nebulous, but not exactly straightforward if you turn to Health Canada's 24-page *Food Guide Facts Background for Educators and Communicators*, which clarifies that a sedentary female

adult would be in the lower range, a pregnant woman “has increased needs for nutrients,” and only athletes, *active* teenagers and people whose job requires physical labour would need the higher end of servings.

If Health Canada plans to get a message out, it may have to use stronger, simpler language. Parents like Macpherson “want a food guide that is easier to understand,” and professionals such as Roblin see a need for “more distinct, clear advice and limits.”

“Other foods” are a case in point. This group covers a broad spectrum, including fats and oils, foods high in sugar or salt, and many beverages including alcohol. The guide is vague

when it comes to this group, saying, “use these foods in moderation.”

“I’d like a stronger statement,” says Giudici. “Perhaps the guide needs to say that these foods can lead to health problems.”

Unlike Canada, which doesn’t even include “other foods” in the rainbow graphic, most countries group fat and sugar together in their food guides as a single, albeit smaller food group. The USA, Australia, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Korea and China all use a pyramid or pagoda shape placing fat and sugar at the top, indicating this should be the smallest portion of the diet.

One renegade food guide does the opposite. The Healthy Eating Pyramid

developed by the Harvard Medical School puts plant oils near the bottom of the guide and has the top of the pyramid shared by two other small groups: red meat and butter; and white rice, white bread, potatoes, pasta and sweets.

The guide is spearheaded by Walter Willett, author of *Eat, Drink, and Be Healthy: The Harvard Medical School Guide to Healthy Eating* (Simon & Schuster 2001), who criticizes the American USDA food pyramid for putting too much emphasis on red meat and lumping too many types of carbohydrates together. Willett calls for greater emphasis on nuts, high-fibre foods and healthy oils.

Unlike both the Canadian food guide and the US food pyramid, the Healthy Eating Pyramid gives dairy a smaller place in the total diet, pairing it with a calcium supplement for those who are lactose intolerant or want to avoid the saturated fat in dairy.

It’s a shift that may see support in Canada. “While milk clearly contains more bone-building nutrients than any other food, I think the time has come for Canada’s guide to stipulate ‘dairy and alternatives’ as a food group,” says Roblin.

Designing one food guide to fit all nutritional needs is a formidable task. The information needs to be easy enough to understand and put in motion, yet has to be sufficiently comprehensive to cover the burgeoning field of nutritional science. A tall order for a single tear sheet.

But Giudici is optimistic. “Healthy eating is not as hard as it appears,” she says. “Make a rainbow on every plate. Remember that variety is the key. Shop for whole foods and avoid highly processed, refined foods. It’s simple, but it does take work.” ♥

## Broccoli and Cheddar Strata

A strata or savoury bread pudding is an easy supper idea that fits all four food groups into one baking dish. Make it the night before, then all you have to do the following evening is plunk it in the oven. Serve with a salad and fresh fruit for dessert for a meal that covers all the nutritional bases.

3 cups (750 mL)	broccoli florets
2 tsp (10 mL)	olive or canola oil
½ cup (125 mL)	onion, finely chopped
5	eggs
2½ cups (625 mL)	skim or 1% milk
2 tbsp (30 mL)	fresh parsley, chopped
1 tsp (5 mL)	Dijon mustard
½ tsp (2 mL)	salt
	freshly ground pepper
1½ cups (375 mL)	old cheddar cheese, grated
½ cup (125 mL)	ham or leftover chicken, chopped
6 slices	whole wheat or multigrain bread, sliced into 1 in. (2.5 cm) cubes

Steam broccoli florets for 3 to 5 minutes or until tender-crisp. Drain. Rinse under cold water. Drain.

Heat a frying pan on medium, add oil and cook onion at medium low until fragrant and soft, about 5 minutes.

In a medium bowl, beat eggs. Whisk in milk, parsley, mustard, salt and pepper.

Grease a 9 in. (23 cm) square baking pan with 2½ in. (6 cm) sides. Arrange half of the bread cubes, all of the broccoli and onions, 1 cup of the cheese and all of the ham in the pan. Pour in two-thirds of the egg and milk mixture. Layer with remaining bread cubes and cheese. Pour in remaining egg mixture. With a spatula, press top layer of bread and cheese down gently to absorb more egg mixture. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate 4 to 24 hours.

Preheat oven to 350°F (180°C). Remove wrap and place strata on middle rack of oven to bake 55 minutes or until puffy and golden and a cake tester comes out dry from the middle of the strata. Allow to sit 5 to 10 minutes. *Serves 6.*

*Our recipe tester, Adell Shneer, tests our Nutrition column using both imperial and metric measurements. However, proportions in the metric version may differ slightly from the original, causing slight variations in the result.*

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