

By Dr TEE E SIONG

YOU would very probably have come across the Malaysian Food Pyramid before.

It is a pyramid-shaped visual guide that assists consumers in making food choices with the aim of promoting healthy nutrition.

Healthy nutrition is the key to strengthening your immunity to combat Covid-19, as well as being indispensable for the prevention of diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

The Health Ministry recently announced a new version of the Malaysian Food Pyramid with some significant changes.

This article provides an explanation of the updated food pyramid and how it can be an easy guide to making healthier daily food choices.

Part of the MDG

Before going into detail about the new Malaysian Food Pyramid, let us take a quick look at the Malaysian Dietary Guidelines (MDG) in order to have a proper perspective of the food pyramid within the MDG.

The MDG is a set of science-based advisory statements that provide practical dietary guidance to the population, so that we can select diets that promote health and prevent nutrition-related deficiencies and excesses.

It comprises specific food-based messages regarding healthy eating, such as eating a variety of food, specific food groups, maintaining healthy body weight, reading food labels and food safety.

Included in the MDG is the Malaysian Food Pyramid.

This visual guide is intended to assist consumers in making food choices and should be used together with the MDG's key messages.

The first formal MDG was published in 1999 and subsequently updated in 2010.

Food pyramid update

The Malaysian Food Pyramid has been revised to better guide Malaysians in making healthy food choices.

After a decade, a further revision of the guidelines has been carried out to take into account the changes in dietary patterns and lifestyles of Malaysians.

While the complete MDG 2020 has yet to be officially published, the Health Ministry has went ahead and released the revamped Malaysian Food Pyramid.

Before we take a closer look at what's new and the significance of the update, it may be useful to learn more about the food pyramid itself and how you can use it effectively.

What is a food pyramid?

The Malaysian Food Pyramid is a pictorial representation that graphically translates the food-based dietary guidelines into a single illustration.

It addresses the recommended diet pattern that embodies the overall message included in the dietary guidelines.

Also known as the food guide pyramid, its main purpose is to serve as a tool to assist individuals in selecting the appropriate food intake, i.e. the types and amounts of food that should be eaten in combination to provide a healthy diet that meets daily nutrient needs.

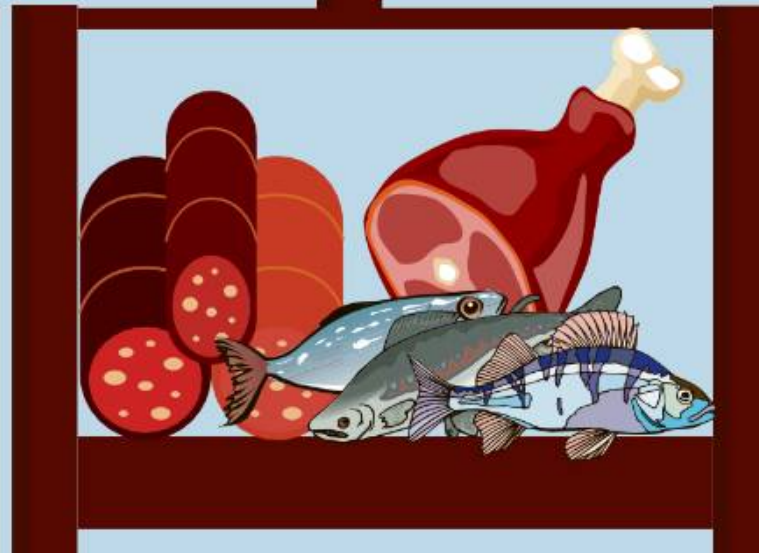
The Malaysian Food Pyramid consists of four levels.

Three of the levels are occupied by five food groups, with the foods having similar nutritional values being grouped together.

The group of foods at the tip of the pyramid – the fourth level – is not truly a “group” as they differ in their nutritional content, but more on that later.

The levels of the pyramid are arranged in such a way as to give a visual guide on the amounts of each food group to be consumed in accordance with the shape of the pyramid.

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The Malaysian Healthy Plate serves to guide healthy food choices for each meal, while the Malaysian Food Pyramid provides recommendations for the entire day's intake. — Photos: Filepic



While the recommendation to drink plain water was already present in previous MDGs, it has now been visualised in the Malaysian Food Pyramid.



In the carbohydrate group, which has been moved to a different level of the food pyramid, whole grains are now emphasised. — AFP

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From the bottom to the top of the food pyramid, the size of each food group becomes smaller, indicating that we should eat more of the foods at the base of the pyramid and less of the foods at the higher levels of the pyramid.

Another important feature of the food pyramid is that serving sizes are provided for each of these food groups.

Healthy eating can generally be achieved if we follow the principle of balance, moderation and variety.

The food pyramid is a visual guide to assist us in adopting and practising these three elements:

> **Balance**
To obtain the required nutrients daily, one must consume meals that are complete, i.e. meals that contain all major food groups, e.g. fruits and vegetables for vitamins, minerals, phytonutrients and fibre; cereals, tubers and products for carbohydrates; and fish, poultry, meats, eggs or legumes for protein.

> **Moderation**
The food groups must be consumed in the appropriate amounts for optimal functioning of the body.

Guidance for this is provided by the serving sizes for each food group, placed at the side of the food pyramid.

> **Variety**
This point emphasises the importance of consuming different types of foods from the same food group.

Although similar foods are grouped together, they do differ significantly in their nutritional profile.

A better chance of receiving all the nutrients needed daily would be to consume different vegetables and fruits; choose different fish, meat and legume products; and consume different carbohydrate sources.

So, what's new?

The new food pyramid has been designed to provide guidance for adults aged 18-45 years.

While the general approach and content of the revised food pyramid is similar to the previous version, there are several important changes:

> **Levels 1 and 2 have been swapped**

Previously set as level 2 in the food pyramid, fruits and vegetables have now been moved to level 1 (the base of pyramid) to encourage higher consumption.

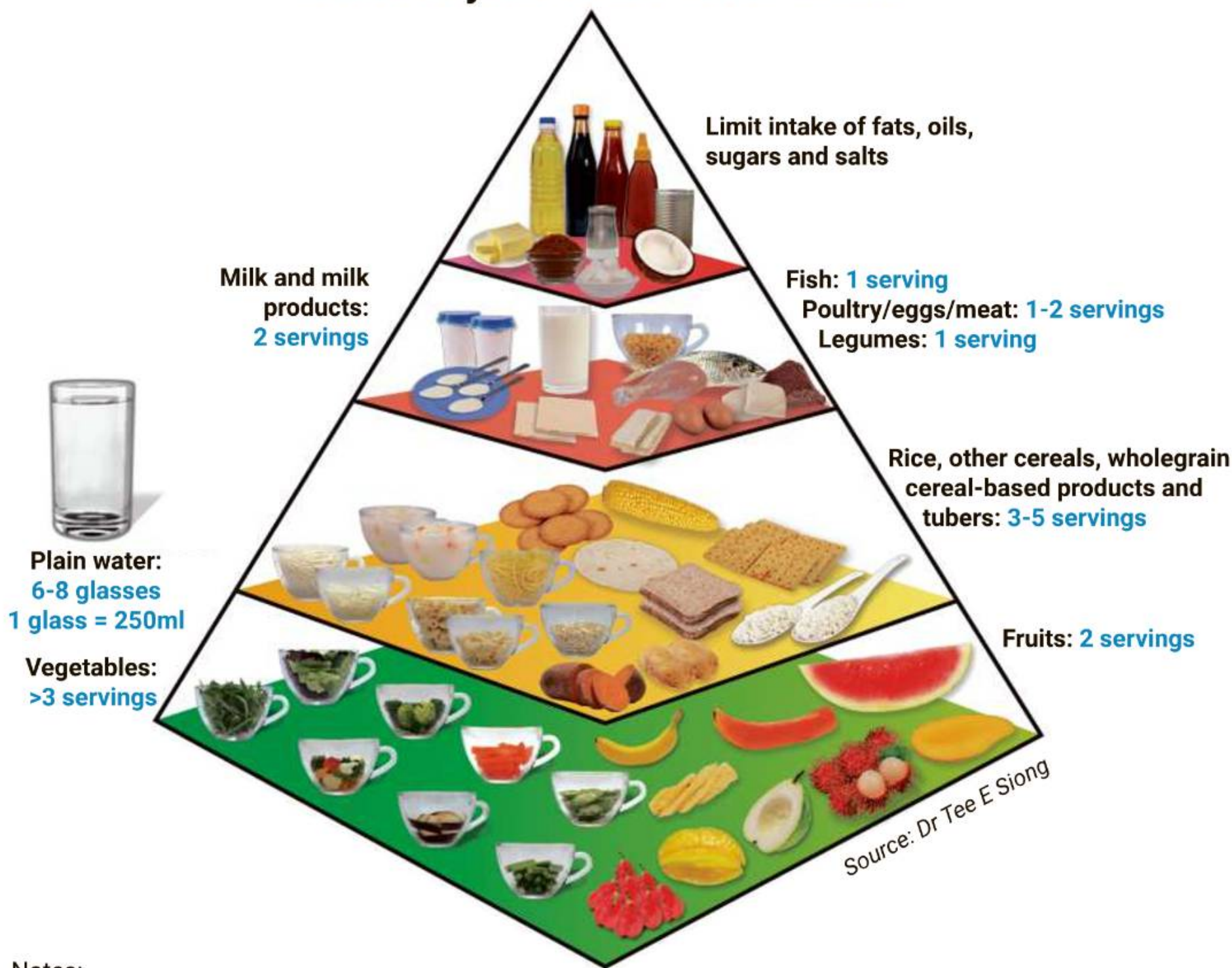
The number of daily servings recommended for vegetables has been increased to more than three servings, while that for fruits remains the same, i.e. at least two servings daily.

According to the 2019 National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS), it was found that almost all adults nationwide (95%) do not eat enough fruits and vegetables.

A greater prominence is there-

A visual guide

MALYSIAN FOOD PYRAMID 2020 Guide to your DAILY food intake



Notes:

1. The recommended number of servings is calculated based on 1,500kcal, 1,800kcal and 2,000kcal for adults.
2. Less active/sedentary adults should choose the minimum number of servings.

fore being placed on fruits and vegetables to further emphasise their importance to health, especially in strengthening immunity and for prevention of NCDs.

After all, they are an excellent source of vitamins, minerals, dietary fibre and phytonutrients.

They are also low in fat and carbs, hence low in calories (with the exception of some fruits such as durian).

> **Lower carbohydrate intake**

Previously placed at level 1, it gave the impression to consumers that carbohydrate-containing foods must be consumed in large amounts.

However, carbs are energy-rich and excessive consumption should be avoided, especially in view of the high rates of overweight and obesity in the country.

Hence, carbs have been moved up to level 2 of the new food pyramid, signalling to consumers that they should be consumed in lesser amounts.

The number of recommended servings per day has also been reduced to three to five servings, as opposed to the previous recommendation of four to eight servings per day.

Another significant change to

this food group is that the food pyramid now emphasises the consumption of whole grains.

Whole grains contain the entire kernel (bran, germ and endosperm), and hence, have higher amounts of vitamins, minerals and phytonutrients.

Do take note and choose whole grains and their products (e.g. brown rice, whole wheat and other wholegrain products).

> **Drinking plain water highlighted**

The recommendation to drink sufficient plain water was in previous versions of the MDG, but was never represented in the food pyramid.

Its inclusion now serves as a visual reminder to encourage all Malaysians to stay well-hydrated by drinking sufficient water every day.

It is also to be noted that the picture in the food pyramid clearly indicates plain water.

This is a clear message to consume less sugar-sweetened beverages as the excessive intake of sugar can lead to unwanted weight gain.

> **Recommended serving sizes and food items displayed**

As mentioned above, the new

food pyramid recommends an increase in the number of servings of vegetables and a reduction in the serving size of cereals, tubers and products.

There are no major changes in the serving sizes of other food groups portrayed in the pyramid.

It should be noted that fats, oil, sugar and salt, are still retained at level 4 (the tip of the pyramid).

These are to be consumed sparingly or in limited amounts.

To help consumers understand what constitutes a serving of the food items mentioned in the food pyramid, the pictures of food items are now portrayed as the actual recommended serving sizes.

At the base of the pyramid, several examples of one serving of a fruit or vegetable are given.

For level 2, examples of one serving of rice, bread or noodles are shown.

Similarly for level 3, what constitutes a serving of a chicken, fish or soya bean product are given.

And on the left of level 3, a serving of milk and other dairy products is now clearly depicted.

It is to be noted that the food items shown in the food pyramid are examples only, and the con-

sumer should utilise other food items they are familiar with.

They should be able to easily use the same principles of what constitutes a serving for food items not shown in the pyramid.

Pyramid or plate?

In addition to the Malaysian Food Pyramid, you may have also heard of the Malaysian Healthy Plate.

This is another visual guide for healthy eating, which uses the quarter-quarter-half concept (a quarter of the plate for grains and grain products, a quarter of the plate for proteins, and half the plate for fruits/veggies).

There should be no confusion as to which guide to follow for healthy eating.

Both the Food Pyramid and Healthy Plate should be used as they complement each other.

The main difference is that the Food Pyramid serves as a guide for one's daily selection of food items and serving sizes, while the Healthy Plate serves as a guide for the amount and types of foods for each meal.

Easy to use

The food pyramid is a simple, yet effective guide to help you adopt healthy eating practices that are based on the principle of balance, moderation and variety.

It is actually rather simple to remember and easy to use, once the principle is grasped.

You will need to have basic knowledge on the main nutrients contained in the different foods.

Take some time to familiarise yourself with the serving sizes of the food groups too.

Healthy eating and active living are the key to better manage our weight and decrease our risk of developing chronic conditions such as obesity, heart disease, stroke and type 2 diabetes.

These are also the ways to strengthen our immunity to help fight Covid-19.

Healthy eating is simple to achieve, provided you stay disciplined by consistently following the recommendations and principles in the MDG and the Malaysian Food Pyramid!

Dr Tee E Siong is the president of the Nutrition Society of Malaysia. For more information, email starhealth@thestar.com.my or visit the websites of the Nutrition Society of Malaysia (nutriweb.org.my) and Nutrition Month Malaysia (www.nutritionmonthmalaysia.org.my). The information provided is for educational purposes only and should not be considered as medical advice. The Star does not give any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to the content appearing in this column. The Star disclaims all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.