

The USA introduced the Food Pyramid in 1992 with the intention of offering nutritional advice on how to make healthy dietary choices. This pyramid had different food groups placed in sections: the largest represented the grain group, followed by the fruit and vegetable group, the dairy group, and the smallest represented the protein group. The pyramid's design was meant to suggest that people should consume more food from its base and fewer meals and liquids from its top<sup>1</sup>. During the first half of the twentieth century, the government aimed to provide guidelines to help people make more informed decisions about their diets and ensure they were consuming a balanced diet that met their nutritional needs. The government provided information on the recommended daily intake of different nutrients, like protein, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins, and minerals. Despite its good intentions, the USDA Food Pyramid (1992) was flawed in several ways, including an emphasis on high carbohydrate consumption and its inadequate representation of protein, which resulted in a shift in the public's dietary habits, leading to negative health outcomes.

The USDA Food Pyramid's flawed design places too much emphasis on carbohydrates and not enough on protein and healthy fats. Research has shown the importance of including adequate amounts of protein and healthy fats in one's diet for optimal health, yet the pyramid fails to highlight these nutrients. In the 1992's food pyramid<sup>2</sup>, fats, oils, and sweets are displayed at the top tier of the pyramid, "indicating that Americans should consume it the least or in small amounts"<sup>3</sup> – they are high in cholesterol and can contribute to health issues. However, the pyramid oversimplified the importance of having different nutrients by grouping all fruits and

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<sup>1</sup>Jacqueline B. Marcus. "Nutrition Basics: What Is inside Food, How It Functions and Healthy Guidelines." *Culinary Nutrition* (2013): 1–50.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, 1992.

<sup>3</sup>Farrell. "The Food Pyramid Was Never about Keeping You Healthy. It Was about Making Corporations Money."

vegetables, and all fats together without making distinctions between their nutritional values, which led to unhealthy eating habits. It “visually communicated that people should eat more carbs because they’re good and eat less fat because it’s bad, sidestepping the issue that there are good and bad carbs and fats.”<sup>4</sup> By focusing solely on reducing fat and increasing carb intake, the importance of consuming healthy sources of carbs and fats got overlooked, leading people to consume too much sugar and processed foods. The idea that following a low-fat diet was better came from the “assumption that the public would have difficulty understanding the distinctions between types of fat.”<sup>5</sup> However, the flawed design led to an increase in the consumption of processed and refined carbs, which resulted in various health issues.

The USDA’s flawed dietary advice led to serious health consequences. Americans started to consume less fat and more carbs, which led to an increase in the consumption of processed and refined carbs. The increase in carbs consumption and decrease in protein consumption led to the rise in obesity, as healthy fats got replaced “with sugar and refined carbs, which fuelled the obesity crisis.”<sup>6</sup> Studies have pointed out that saturated fats, like red meat, are associated with an increased risk of heart disease “due to their effect on blood cholesterol levels”<sup>5</sup> and following a diet high in saturated fats and cholesterol has been linked to an increased likelihood of developing coronary heart disease.<sup>7</sup> These studies shaped the dietary recommendation because they implied that reducing the saturated fat and cholesterol intake could help lower the risk of heart disease. The meat and dairy industries had a strong influence on the development of the food pyramid by ensuring that their products were included in the recommended diet, despite concerns about potential health risks associated with consuming diets high in saturated fat and

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<sup>4</sup>Rhodes. “USDA Demolishing the Food Pyramid.”

<sup>5</sup>Scrinis. *Nutritionism: The Science and Politics of Dietary Advice*. (Page. 102-103)

<sup>6</sup>Pyanov. “Did the Food Pyramid Cause Our Obesity Crisis? 3 Major Mistakes Health Officials Made.”

<sup>7</sup> Keys and Grande. *American Journal of Public Health*.

cholesterol.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the food pyramid emphasized the consumption of carbs and has the recommendation of “6-11 servings of bread, cereal, rice, and pasta”<sup>9</sup> a day. This recommendation wasn’t supported by evidence, and some experts argue that it may have contributed to the rise in obesity in the U.S.<sup>8</sup> The increase in obesity rate wasn’t a new phenomenon, but after the food pyramid, it increased by “almost 10%,”<sup>10</sup> which was a concerning trend. While the rise in obesity has multiple factors, the food pyramid had some influence in the upward trend as magazines like Men's Health began promoting high-carb diets by combining photos of athletic people with attention-grabbing marketing slogans like "high-impact eating plan” and “lose the belly.”<sup>11</sup> In light of these health consequences, it is evident that the flawed dietary advice recommended by the USDA has had a profound impact on public health.

In conclusion, the flaws in the USDA Food Pyramid introduced in 1992 have had a significant impact on public health. The emphasis on carbohydrates at the expense of protein has led to an increase in the consumption of processed and refined carbohydrates. This then led to a decrease in protein consumption, resulting in the rise of obesity and other health problems. This misguided dietary advice has been particularly detrimental to the vulnerable population that requires protein intake for healthy muscle and bone development. Although the government's intention was to promote a balanced diet that met nutritional needs, the flawed pyramid negatively shifted the public's dietary habits, indicating that nutritional guidelines must be continuously reviewed and improved to ensure healthy outcomes for the public.

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<sup>8</sup>Heid. “Food Industry Lobbying and U.S. 2015 Dietary Guidelines.”

<sup>9</sup>U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, 1992.

<sup>10</sup>Vasconcelos. “Are Nutritional Guidelines Contributing to the Obesity Epidemic?”

<sup>11</sup>“Men’s Health: Show Your Strength” Men’s Health. (1995)

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