

MyPyramid.gov Provides Consumers with Practical Nutrition Information at Their Fingertips

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INTRODUCTION

The plan for the USDA MyPyramid Food Guidance System¹ included a new graphic and slogan, clear and concise nutrition messages, and a variety of materials and tools to help motivate and educate consumers to follow a healthful diet. Given the widespread availability of the Internet in homes and through schools and public libraries, and the Internet's ability to deliver quantities of information efficiently, it was decided to use the Internet as a primary dissemination tool for the new food guidance system. The MyPyramid.gov Web site was developed to provide a range of tools and information to meet the needs of varied audiences.

WEB SITE DESCRIPTION

From the MyPyramid.gov homepage (Figure 1), consumers can locate personalized nutrition recommendations, find in-depth nutrition information,

and assess their own food intake and physical activity level. Using **MyPyramid Plan**, consumers can find information about the kinds and amounts of foods they should eat each day. By entering age, gender, height, weight, and activity level, a user receives a food intake plan that meets his or her nutritional needs at an appropriate calorie level. The personalized plan includes specific daily amounts from each food group and a limit for discretionary calories. MyPyramid Plans are available at each of MyPyramid's 12 calorie levels, which range from 1000 to 3200 calories.

Inside the Pyramid is where consumers can find in-depth information about each food group, oils, discretionary calories, and physical activity. This section of the Web site includes tips and resources to help users implement their **MyPyramid Plan**. Information in this section includes foods in each group and subgroup, food group cup or ounce equivalencies, health benefits, tips for making wise choices, and a food photo gallery to help identify portion sizes.

Consumers who want a detailed assessment and analysis of their current eating and physical activity habits can use the Web site's **MyPyramid Tracker**. An accompanying article describes this interactive tool.²

Information designed specifically for children aged 6 to 11 is available in the **For Kids** section, also described in an accompanying article.³ In addition to the content for consumers, the Web site provides considerable information **For Professionals**, such as background information on MyPyramid, downloadable resources, and relevant links for further information.

WEB SITE EVALUATION

Web site topics were based on 2005 Dietary Guidelines recommendations,

and the content incorporated findings from previous consumer research.⁴ The content was peer reviewed by several nutrition educators and then reviewed for consistency with the 2005 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* by standing committees within both USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services.

Prior to launch of the MyPyramid.gov Web site, usability testing was conducted with consumers. Testing employed a number of industry-accepted methods to create functional tools and to assess their effectiveness.^{5,6} Usability testing consisted of 18 one-on-one interviews, each about 1 hour in length, facilitated by a human factors expert in a setting similar to a focus group facility. Participants were selected using screening criteria similar to those used in the formative research for the MyPyramid consumer interface.⁷ Additional criteria included familiarity with and use of the Internet and inclusion of a mix of physical activity levels. Participants controlled the computer as they would in a typical home or office setting. The interviewer explored participants' ability to navigate a prototype of the Web site; their assessment of the prototype's organization, look-and-feel, and overall content; and the usefulness of the **MyPyramid Plan**.

Respondents reacted very favorably to the prototype Web site and experienced little or no difficulty navigating it or using **MyPyramid Plan**. Most lauded the site's clear, simple design and its use of an appropriate combination of text and graphics. Several noted the site's inviting and colorful presentation. Respondents generally concurred that site text was written at an appropriate reading level for them. (Web site text was targeted to be at a 7th to 8th grade reading level.) In addition, as the test sessions concluded, most participants expressed disappointment that they



Figure 1. MyPyramid.gov homepage.

could not explore the site further and asked when the actual Web site would be launched for public use.

Testing revealed that the prototype did not contain any usability issues that prevented successful operation or exploration of the site. However, a few moderate usability issues were identified and were addressed before MyPyramid's launch. For example, the prototype **MyPyramid Plan** results page required users to scroll down to view results. Respondents recommended placing the most relevant results at the top of the page. The interface was revised to place the primary information for the results page "above the fold," with a clear indication that additional information is included if the user scrolls downward.

Also, respondents expected varying levels of nutrition information, and some were unable to locate the information they wanted on the prototype site. In response, food group

and physical activity information was reorganized to be presented in a step-wise approach, from general to specific, with clear paths and succinct titles leading to more detailed information. Not only did this reorganization provide a clearer path to improve the site's usability, but it also gave users increased control in determining whether or not to view additional data.

Some respondents were unclear as to how to use the nutrition information on the site given their lifestyle. Respondents expressed the need to ensure that the site reach users of varying lifestyles, for example, those who do not cook at home, as well as those with different eating preferences, such as vegetarians. The **Tips and Resources** section was expanded to include more information for these groups.

Testing suggested that the large audience of Internet-savvy consumers is capable of navigating and under-

standing detailed nutrition information if it is presented in a clear and logical format. Varying levels of information are necessary to reach consumers with different needs and levels of sophistication. Finally, colorful, inviting, and exciting tools and materials are needed to capture and hold the interest of contemporary consumers. In line with the original vision and plan for MyPyramid,¹ USDA intends to continue developing new content and tools for MyPyramid.gov that add functionality to the Web site, target the needs of specific groups of potential users, and provide fresh content that fosters repeat visits to the site.

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