

Revised healthy eating guidelines and Food Pyramid rationale

This rationale paper is to help inform Dietitians, Health Professionals, Teachers and Health Correspondents about changes to revised Healthy Eating Guidelines and Food Pyramid.



1.0 Context

The Obesity Policy and Action Plan – *A Healthy Weight for Ireland (2016–2025)* calls for the development of a suite of Healthy Eating Guidelines for the general population. These revised Healthy Eating Guidelines and Food Pyramid resources, are an early action under the Plan (Action 5.3.)

The Department of Health wants to emphasise that we have a single set of Healthy Eating Guidelines and a single Food Pyramid which had been developed and endorsed by all organisations working in nutrition in Ireland.

2.0 The Healthy Eating Guidelines and Food Pyramid

The Healthy Eating Guidelines and Food Pyramid are the policy tools used to define the government recommendations on healthy eating and a balanced diet. The revised Healthy Eating Guidelines and Food Pyramid toolkit has been developed by the Department of Health and the Health Service Executive with key stakeholders and aims to help reduce the intake of high fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) foods and drinks from the Top Shelf of the Food Pyramid.

The revised Healthy Eating Guidelines and Food Pyramid are based on

- a review of the previous HEG conducted by the HRB (2013)
- the Healthy Ireland Survey results (2015, 2016)
- the FSAI Scientific Recommendations for Healthy Eating in Ireland (2011)
- UK, EU, WHO and international recommendations (2012–2015)
- focus group testing with both consumers and health professionals. (Ipsos MRBI 2015, 2016)

3.0 The Background

Dietary factors are the most important risk factors undermining health and well-being in every single country in the WHO European Region.

Excess consumption of saturated fats, trans fats, sugars and salt and low consumption of fruit and vegetables are leading risk factors for these diseases. Alcohol intake also contributes to calories and in regular drinkers may contribute to overweight and obesity.

Current research provides evidence of moderate to strong links between healthy dietary patterns of lower fat, saturated fat and salt intakes, higher vegetable, fruit and fibre intakes and lower risks of obesity and chronic diseases, particularly cardiovascular disease, hypertension, Type 2 diabetes and certain cancers.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) levels of overweight and obesity are forecast to increase and Ireland could top the European “League Tables” by 2030. (WHO) The fact that the majority of the Irish population is overweight or obese means that Ireland faces a dramatic increase in chronic diseases. In the worst case scenario, this will reverse the improvement in life expectancy seen in the last few decades.

Overweight and obesity are largely preventable, however, in the past two decades levels of overweight and obesity in Ireland have doubled and **safefood** has estimated the financial burden as €1.19 billion per annum. Now only 40% of the Irish adult population have a healthy weight. In children by age three, 25% are overweight or obese). In terms of scale, this represents one of the biggest public health challenges Ireland is facing today.

Obesity and a number of chronic diseases are related to poor quality dietary patterns and physical inactivity. These include cardiovascular disease, hypertension, type 2 diabetes and diet-related cancers.

These problems focus the attention of the Irish health care system on disease treatment rather than prevention; increase already strained health care costs; and reduce overall population health, quality of life, and national productivity.

These diseases disproportionately affect low-income communities and they reflect a diet that is on average, low in vegetables, fruit, and whole grains, and high in salt, calories, saturated fat and added sugars.

A healthy diet is crucial in maintaining a healthy weight as well as encouraging positive lifestyles generally. The findings of Irish adult and children nutrition surveys over the last ten years show that eating habits are not consistent with optimal health. The 2007 SLAN survey, which was the last national survey that looked at compliance with the FOOD Pyramid as a whole, shows that less than 1% of respondents met the recommendations for all 5 shelves of the Food Pyramid; 10% did not comply with the recommendations for any shelf and almost three-quarters (73%) only met the recommendations for 1 or 2 of the shelves. The recent Healthy Ireland surveys report on the Top Shelf and Fruit and Vegetables shelf of the Food Pyramid and these results are detailed in the next section.

4.0 The Problem

A healthy diet is crucial in maintaining a healthy weight as well as encouraging positive lifestyles generally. The findings of Irish adult and children nutrition surveys over the last ten years show that eating habits are not consistent with optimal health.

Excess consumption of saturated fats, trans fats, sugars and salt (especially from foods and drinks on the top shelf of the Food Pyramid) and low consumption of fruit and vegetables are the major problems in the Irish diet according to the Irish Universities Nutrition Alliance survey in 2012. This picture has been confirmed by two major recent surveys carried out by the Department of Health, the Healthy Ireland Surveys in 2015 and 2016. The Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC), which looked at the eating behaviour of children aged 9–18 years, also found similar results.

The finding from this year’s Healthy Ireland Surveys of most concern to the Department of Health is that 60% eat HFSS snacks every day with most of these (42% of the population) eating 6 or more portions daily. In addition, 14% consume sugar sweetened drinks daily, rising to 22% of those aged 15 to 24.

Additional findings include:

- 60% of Irish people over 15 years are overweight or obese
- 37% overweight and 23% obese
- 46% of men aged 35 and over in Ireland are overweight and a further 32% are obese.
- 27% eat five or more servings of fruit and vegetables daily
- 54% mostly eat homemade meals cooked from scratch using fresh ingredients
- 41% additional people eat meals using a combination of fresh ingredients and packets/jars of ingredients
- 75% of the Irish population have consumed alcohol in the past year
- 55% of drinkers doing so at least weekly, with weekly drinking highest among 55–64 year olds(66%)
- 68% of people are not sufficiently active to meet the recommendations for health benefits
- Activity levels decrease significantly with age
- The proportion that are meeting the National Physical Activity Guidelines decreases with age

Given the activity levels of the Irish population – active (32%) and inactive (68%) the revised HEG/FP provides population healthy eating guidance for those who are active and inactive.

5.0 Healthy Dietary Patterns

In order to achieve better health goals, population nutrition goals should be adopted in line with WHO/FAO recommendations. These have been broadly adopted by Ireland by the Department of Health and the Food Safety Authority of Ireland.

A healthy diet should contain:

- Less than 10% of daily energy from saturated fats
- Less than 1% of daily energy from trans fats
- Less than 10% of daily energy from added sugars progressively reducing to 5%*
- More than 400g fruits and vegetables a day
- Less than 5g a day of salt (6 g population recommendation FSAI 2016)

The overall body of scientific evidence (the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, Public Health England, World Health Organisation European Region, US Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee) identifies that a healthy dietary pattern is;

- higher in vegetables, fruits, whole grains,
- moderate in low fat milk, cheese and yogurt; fish, peas, beans and lentils;
- lower in processed meats;
- very small amounts of unsaturated reduced fat spreads and oils
- and as low as possible in sugar-sweetened and foods with added sugars (not every day).

These Guidelines are population guidelines and resources show how individuals can combine foods in a variety of flexible ways to achieve healthy dietary patterns and meet the individual's health needs, dietary preferences and cultural traditions.

The revised Healthy Eating Guidelines and Food Pyramid are also based on the FSAI *Scientific Recommendations for Healthy Eating Guidelines in Ireland* from 2011. The goal of these revised resources is to provide food-based recommendations using the Food Pyramid as a guide.

They describe how to build a healthy diet, for different age groups (from 5 years of age), depending also on gender and activity levels. A tool kit of resources (see section 6.0) is available to support the Irish population to make choices that add up to an overall healthy eating pattern, that combines healthy choices from across all food groups, while paying attention to calorie limits, too.

A Food Guide outlining in detail the Healthy Eating Guidelines will be available for Health Professionals and Catering Services early in 2017. This Guide is being developed by the FSAI in conjunction with the Department of Health Technical Nutrition Sub-group. This Food Guide will form the basis of training for health professionals delivered by the HSE and supported by all stakeholders.

6.0 Developing the revised Healthy Eating Guidelines and Food Pyramid

A key requirement in developing national healthy lifestyle guidelines is that it represents a consensus of all the major stakeholders, so that health professionals and the general public get a clear, consistent message.

To achieve this objective, the DoH established a broad Stakeholder Working Group to develop the revised Healthy Eating Guidelines and Food Pyramid. This Working Group was chaired by the Department of Health and included representation from the Health Promotion Unit, Healthy Ireland and the Health Service Executive together with **safefood**, FSAI, INDI and the Health Research Board. A Department of Health led Technical Nutrition Sub-group of dietitians and nutritionists on the Working Group worked on the technical nutrition details.

6.1 The revised Food Pyramid model

The Food Pyramid divides foods and drinks into 5 main shelves. It is a visual representation of how different foods and drinks can contribute towards a healthy balanced diet. The shape of the Food Pyramid shows the types of foods and drinks people need to eat most for healthy eating to provide the range of nutrients and energy needed for good health.

Preferably closer to 5%(WHO 2014)
Lower in processed meat (WHO 2015)

Healthy eating is all about choosing the right amounts from each Shelf. The size of the shelves for each of the food groups is consistent with government recommendations for a diet that would provide the range of nutrients required for a healthy adult or child (over the age of 5).

The main revisions are:

- (a) a major focus on LIMITING Top Shelf Foods to only once or twice a week
- (b) Increasing the servings from the Vegetables, Salad and Fruit shelf from 5 a day up to 7. This means that the Vegetables, Salad and Fruit Shelf is the largest shelf and moves to the bottom of the Pyramid
- (c) The Wholemeal Cereals and Breads, Potatoes, Pasta and Rice Shelf then moves up from the bottom to be the second last shelf
- (d) A single serving is now considered to be approximately 150kcal (plus or minus 25kcal) This now equates to 2 thin slices of regular pan bread at about 150 calories. (FSAI, 2012) The range of servings from this Shelf is 3 to 5 servings/day – with up to 7 for teenage boys and men aged 19–50. (more detail in 7.0)
- (e) Limiting processed salty meats like sausages, bacon and ham to not every day, in line with the FSAI 2015 recommendations.

Three key consumer messages are

- (a) **Limit High Fat, Salt and Sugar (HFSS) foods and drinks** from the Top Shelf of the Food Pyramid – NOT EVERY DAY – MAXIMUM ONCE OR TWICE A WEEK.
- (b) **Eat more vegetables, salad and fruit** – up to 7 servings a day. Encouraging a change in eating habits from HFSS snacks to eating more fruit and raw veg as snacks foods instead, for example fruit with yogurt, carrot sticks with low calorie dip
- (c) **Size matters** – use the Food Pyramid as a guide for serving sizes, for example, bread in sandwiches at lunch time. 1 small wrap or a pitta pocket = 2 slices of bread. 1 demi baguette = 4 slices of bread.

Daily meal plans and Food Pyramid fact sheets as well as a range of infographics have been developed.

The revised Food Pyramid **separates** the Top Shelf from the rest of the Food Pyramid as these foods and drinks high in fat, sugar and salt are not essential in a healthy diet and may promote overweight and obesity. Most Irish people need to cut down on them drastically to achieve a healthy balance.

Vegetables, salad and fruit are now the biggest shelf and are at the bottom of the revised Food Pyramid to emphasise that people need to choose more of these. Only 27% of the Irish population eat 5 servings from this shelf. Advice now emphasises eating more of these, up to 7 servings a day and also choosing them as snacks in preference to HFSS foods from the Top Shelf.

Energy needs are different throughout life. All foods provide energy however, foods on the Wholegrain Cereals and Breads, Potatoes, Pasta and Rice Shelf provide the best energy for the body to work. This shelf covers a wide choice of foods and following the Servings Guide Table below will provide a guide to the right amount of servings depending on age, gender, whether active or inactive and healthy weight or overweight. It is recommended that energy come from these wholegrain healthy filling foods instead of unhealthy high fat, salt and sugar foods and drinks from the Top Shelf.

Following the Food Pyramid doesn't mean this balance needs to be achieved with every meal, over a day or even a week will improve the diet. Many of the foods eaten today, such as pizzas, casseroles, pasta dishes and sandwiches are a combination of the food shelves. For these sorts of foods, looking at the main ingredients and thinking about how these fit with shelves on the Food Pyramid will help guide food choices.





This Food Pyramid guide is for children over 5 and all adults, both healthy weight and overweight. This is because two out of three Irish adults are overweight and some extra advice is included for them. Following the Top Tips for losing weight on the back page of the leaflet will also help.

7.0 Serving Guide

Wholegrain breads and cereals, potatoes, pasta and rice

A single serving is now considered to be approximately 150kcal (plus or minus 25kcal) This now equates to 2 thin slices of regular pan bread at about 150 calories. (FSAI, 2012) The range of servings from this Shelf is 3 to 5 servings/day – with up to 7 for teenage boys and men aged 19–50.

Given the wide variety of energy needs from different age groups, gender and activity levels – a range is provided for this shelf, with explanatory information.

Active	Child	Teenager	Adult (19–50)	Adult (51+)	Inactive	Teenager	Adult (19–50)	Adult (51+)
	3–4	4	4–5	3–4		3	3–4	3
	3–5	5–7	5–7	4–5		4–5	4–6	4



Vegetables, salad and fruit

Given the low consumption of Fruit and Vegetables (only 27% eat five or more portions of fruit and vegetables daily) in the Healthy Ireland, this shelf now is the largest (bottom) shelf of the Food Pyramid

Additions

Average daily energy requirements for men and women has been used to reinforce the message that all food and drinks consumed contribute to total energy intake as a useful benchmark for individuals for their own consumption.

Average Total daily calorie intake for all food and all drinks

	Active	Inactive
	2000kcal	1800kcal
	2500kcal	2000kcal

Fluid requirements and activity advice are included, as is a Serving Guide. Alcohol weekly limits are provided in the HEG/FP leaflet.

8.0 Daily Meal Plans – Food Pyramid to Plate

Seven daily meal plan case studies have been developed to help translate the Food Pyramid recommendations to different daily meal plans. These plans were designed for 7 individuals aged 5 and over, who all have different lifestyles and nutritional needs and shows how their differing food choices can all meet the Food Pyramid recommendations. **safefood** has initially developed these meal plans as a reflection of focus groups' feedback relative to what is an acceptable healthy diet. The menu plans were designed by real people and then modified by the DOH Technical Nutrition Sub-group to fit in with the Food Pyramid serving sizes and frequency of recommendations.

More of these practical guides will be developed to illustrate other life stages and dietary preferences such as one for vegetarian and other multi-cultural eating patterns.

9.0 Size matters

In addition to the resources being launched by the Department of Health to focus on the importance of having smaller portion sizes and using the Food Pyramid as a guide for these, **safefood** have a number of supporting infographics that help guide consumers by translating the Food Pyramid recommendations into everyday foods and household serving sizes.

10.0 Communications and Training

The HSE are updating all existing programmes and resources with the new Healthy Eating Guidelines and Food Pyramid to ensure consistent evidence – based nutrition advice is available. Promoting the revised guidelines will be a central component of the HSE communications strategy to staff, service users and the general public.

The INDI are developing a communications plan to include radio and TV slots and e-zine news letter to all 750 dietitians and having selected twitter and facebook posts.

11.0 National Implementation Plan

Each of the members of the DOH HEG group (DOH, HSE, **safe**food, FSAI, INDI) is developing an implementation plan to support the revised HEG/FP. This Implementation Plan will be available on the HI website.

12.0 The Healthy Eating Guidelines and Food Pyramid HEG/Food Pyramid resource Toolkit

A range of new resources have been developed to help translate the Food Pyramid daily food choices in daily menus, that is Pyramid to Plate advice

The toolkit/suite of resources includes;

- A3 Food Pyramid poster for health professionals and educators – details of serving sizes
- A3 Food Pyramid for consumers
- A3 Simple Food Pyramid poster – for all who request the FP graphic
- 8 page Leaflet
- 6 fact sheets – 1 for each shelf of the Food Pyramid.
- 7 Daily menus – examples for different target age and lifestyle people
- Q&A
- Myth busters fact sheet
- Rationale paper for revision of HEG/FP health professionals and health correspondents
- New Healthy Eating section on the Healthy Ireland website
- Infographics on Serving guides for Wholegrain cereals shelf and Milk shelf, Be Aware of the Calorie Difference on Wholegrain cereals shelf, Get Active and Alcohol guidelines.

Takeaways and other infographics to be added as needed in 2017.

In 2017 also, DOH plans to provide Healthy Eating Guidelines for 1–5 year olds and in 2018 Healthy Eating Guidelines for older people.

The Department of Health will lead on the development of a Nutrition Policy and Action Plan commencing in 2017. This Policy and Action Plan in an action under – *A Healthy Weight for Ireland (2016–2025)* (Action 5.2)

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