

The Planetary Health Food Pyramid

By Edward Esko

Not long ago I was invited to speak at the offices of the Aetna Life Insurance Company outside Detroit. The speech was part of a corporate wellness program held during the employee lunch hour. My speech was scheduled to last about 30 minutes, after which a natural food lunch would be served. The audience would be made up of Aetna employees, including the resident physician. The topic would be the macrobiotic diet.

In preparing the speech, I faced the challenge of how to give an overview of macrobiotics in less than 30 minutes. The word "macrobiotics" is from the Greek "macro," meaning "large" or "great," and "bios," meaning "life." As a topic for study, macrobiotics is infinitely vast. Macrobiotic eating is as varied as life itself. To list, define, and explain the foods my friends, family, and I cook and eat in an average week could take hours, if not days. I have spoken often about macrobiotics over the past twenty-five years. Most public presentations took over an hour. To comply with the limited time allotted for the Aetna presentation, I felt it necessary to present macrobiotics in a new more simple way.

Several days before the event, I sat down with a piece of paper and a pencil. After reflecting on the presentation. I came to the conclusion that presenting the macrobiotic diet in the form of a pyramid might be the best way to go. With that in mind I sketched a pyramid. I inserted whole grains at the base, followed by vegetables, then beans and soybean products. At the top I inserted a category labeled "other foods." Condiments, seasonings, and beverages were inserted along the three outer edges. I named the pyramid the "Planetary Health Food Pyramid." In my thinking, the pyramid depicts an approach to diet that benefits both personal and planetary health. The guidelines represented by the pyramid are generally suited for adults living in temperate climates.

Whole Grains: The Base of the Pyramid

Whole grains and their products are the foundation of a healthy diet. From time immemorial, they have served as humanity's staple foods and the basis for agriculture. They are ideal sources of essential nutrients, including complex carbohydrates and vitamins, and are low in fat and high in fiber. Whole grains for daily use include brown rice, whole wheat, barley, millet, oats, rye, non-GM (genetically modified) corn, and buckwheat. Ideally, one or more servings of whole grains can be eaten at every meal. Hundreds of healthful and appetizing dishes can be prepared with whole grains and whole grain products. Whole grains contain highly concentrated life energy. They are fruit and seed rolled into one. Whole grains retain life energy over centuries. They sprout even after hundreds of years.

Products made from whole grains, such as whole grain breads, noodles, and pasta, are included in the whole grain category. Organically grown grains are preferred over

chemically produced varieties. Whole grains and their products are the principal foods in the macrobiotic diet and thus form the base of the Planetary Health Food Pyramid.

Vegetables: The Second Tier

Vegetables are an ideal complement to whole grains. Fresh or naturally dried vegetables are preferable to canned or frozen varieties. Whenever possible, select vegetables that are grown organically. Vegetables can be steamed, boiled sauteed, stir-fried, pickled, pressed, deep fried, grilled, used in soups and stews, and eaten raw as salad or garnish. Vegetables are excellent sources of vitamins, minerals, and complex carbohydrates. Ideally, 3 to 5 servings of fresh vegetables are included daily. A small daily serving of naturally fermented pickles, including sauerkraut, is also beneficial.

Vegetables for regular use include roots such as daikon, carrot, turnip, burdock, radish, parsnip, and lotus; vegetables with a round shape such as onion, cabbage, and squash; and green vegetables like broccoli, Brussels sprouts, daikon, carrot, and turnip greens, mustard greens, kale, collard greens, scallion, chive, parsley, and watercress. Shiitake and other mushrooms, green beans, peas, sprouts, celery, and lettuce can also be eaten. Sea vegetables, such as nori, wakame, arame, and others, can also be included. Nightshade vegetables, such as potato, tomato, and peppers are not recommended for regular use, due to their potential toxicity and equatorial origin.

Tier Three: Beans & Traditional Soy Products

Beans and traditional soy products make up the third tier of the Planetary Health Food Pyramid. They are excellent sources of vegetable protein and complement a diet of whole grains and vegetables. Beans and/or traditional soy products like tofu and tempeh can be included regularly. In addition to familiar native beans such as kidney, navy, lentil, chickpea, split pea, and others, exotic Asian varieties such as azuki (small red beans) and black soybeans are included in this category.

Traditional soy-based seasonings, such as miso (fermented soy paste) and shoyu (soy sauce) add high quality protein, minerals, and beneficial enzymes to the diet. They can be used regularly to season soup and other dishes. Organic (non-GM) soybean products are preferred.

The Fourth Tier: Other Foods

A variety of other foods can be included. Their position at the top of the pyramid suggests occasional or optional consumption. For example, some people may choose to include fish; others may choose a vegetarian diet. In theory, practically any food can be placed in this category. The foods we include are entirely up to us. Our choices depend on such factors as age, place of living, sex, activity, health condition, and personal preferences. Below are suggestions for healthful additional foods:

Fish and Seafood Low fat white meat fish is recommended. Fresh, non-farm raised varieties are preferable. For those who wish to avoid animal food, a larger volume of beans and traditional soy products can be used to provide additional protein.

Seasonal Fruit Varieties such as apple, pear, peach, apricot, cherry, strawberry and other berries, cantaloupe, honeydew, watermelon, lemon, and tangerine are excellent. Tropical fruits are best reserved for special occasions.

Seeds and Nuts Included are seeds such as pumpkin, sesame, and sunflower. Almonds, peanuts, walnuts, pecans, and other nuts can also be eaten as snacks or garnish. Tropical nuts, such as cashew, Brazil, and pistachio, are best reserved for special occasions.

Natural Snacks Foods such as leftovers, whole grain noodles, vegetable maki (brown rice and vegetables wrapped in nori sea vegetable), and mochi (pounded rice taffy) are included in this category, as are foods such as popcorn, puffed whole cereals, and rice cakes.

Natural Sweeteners Included in this category are rice syrup, barley malt, amasake (sweet rice milk), dried chestnuts, organic apple butter, and other naturally processed sweeteners. They can be used to sweeten dessert, tea, breakfast cereal, and other dishes.

Condiments, Seasonings, Oil, and Beverages

Condiments A variety of traditional natural condiments can be kept on the table and used to add flavor and nutrients to your dishes. They include:

- *Gomashio (sesame salt made by crushing 20 parts roasted sesame seeds with 1 part roasted sea salt)
- *Shiso (perilla) powder
- *Umeboshi (pickled salt plum)
- *Toasted sesame seeds
- *Tekka (root vegetable and miso condiment)
- *Green nori (dried sea vegetable) flakes
- *Brown rice vinegar
- *Umeboshi vinegar
- *Organic shoyu (traditional soy sauce)

Seasonings and Plant Oils Unrefined white sea salt is recommended for cooking. Traditionally processed miso and shoyu can be used to season soup and other dishes. Brown rice and umeboshi vinegar, mirin (sweet rice cooking wine), lemon, and ginger can also be used. Unrefined organic sesame oil is perfect for use in sauteing and stir-frying. Other naturally processed oils, such as organic (non-GM) corn, olive, and sunflower, are also fine.

Beverages A variety of traditional teas are recommended., including bancha, kukicha, barley tea, and brown rice tea. Organic green tea, Mu tea, corn silk tea, carrot, celery, or vegetable juice, naturally processed amasake and soymilk, and organic apple and other fruit juices are also fine. Natural spring or well water is preferred for cooking and drinking.

Conclusion

On the day of the Aetna presentation, I met with about 30 employees in the staff conference room. The room was equipped with several large white boards. I sketched the Planetary Health Food Pyramid on the board while people were entering. I began the presentation by reviewing articles citing the benefits of whole grains, beans, and fresh vegetables, and the disadvantages of meat and dairy. I then outlined the Planetary Health Food Pyramid. Afterward, people came up and thanked me. It seemed the new format had worked!

I would like to hear what you, the visitors to amberwaves.org, think about the Planetary Health Food Pyramid. I welcome your ideas and suggestions. Also, feel free to use the pyramid whenever you present macrobiotics to your family, friends, or the public. Planetary Health, Inc., the non-profit organization of which Amberwaves is a division, is planning to publish the Planetary Health Food Pyramid. Please contact me at Planetary Health, Inc. if you have suggestions or if you would like copies for your students and friends.

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