

The food pyramid, adjusted for older adults

There's a lot of food for thought on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's MyPyramid. The interactive version at MyPyramid.gov of the venerable food pyramid offers tips and advice on what to eat and how much.

While the knowledge is especially crucial for people over 70, many seniors are still not familiar with the Internet. Additionally, older folks' nutritional requirements are often different from those of the rest of the population. So researchers at Tufts University in Boston have taken the government's data and created the Modified MyPyramid for Older Adults.

"There is a concern that older adults don't have the availability and comfort level with computers," says Alice Lichtenstein, director of the Cardiovascular Nutrition Laboratory at the Jean Mayer USDA Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging at Tufts. Lichtenstein was lead author on the project.

Lichtenstein says the Modified MyPyramid "is specifically targeted for older adults who are relatively healthy and active and want to stay that way." It differs from the government's pyramid in a number of ways. For example, the pyramid bands devoted to fruits and vegetables include icons of frozen-food bags. Lichtenstein says this is to counteract the misconception some older folks have that only fresh produce is healthful.

"In reality, some of the

frozen are better than the fresh," Lichtenstein says. "They are really high-quality and nutrient-dense, sometimes more so than fresh." Frozen fruits and vegetables are perfect for older adults who may be cooking just for one and are worried about overbuying fresh produce. It also means there is an available supply of fruits and vegetables, even on days it's too cold or snowy to go shopping.

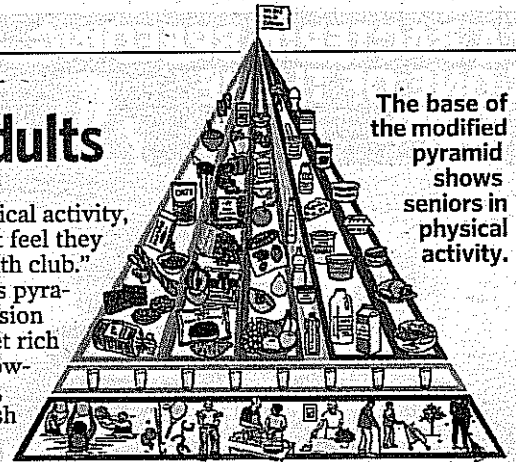
The Tufts pyramid also differs at the base, where there are icons of seniors participating in various physical activities, including walking, doing yard work and cleaning.

"This was to reinforce that physical activity at any age is absolutely critical," Lichtenstein says. "When an older adult hears about increasing

their level of physical activity, they shouldn't just feel they have to join a health club."

Like the USDA's pyramid, the Tufts version recommends a diet rich in whole grains, low-fat dairy products, nuts and beans, fish and lean meats.

But the Modified MyPyramid for Older Adults also includes a flag at the top to signify the need for calcium and Vitamins B12 and D. While the optimum way to get these nutrients is through a good diet, Lichtenstein says that some normal conditions associated with aging can lead to decreased absorption of vitamins and minerals. In this case, supplements may be necessary. But do not take them without talking with



The base of the modified pyramid shows seniors in physical activity.

your physician.

"People need to consult with their health-care provider to determine whether they actually need a supplement," she says. "It's very critical, whether it's nutrient or herbal, because there can be interactions between drugs and supplements."

The Modified MyPyramid for Older Adults can be downloaded from <http://nutrition.tufts.edu/docs/pdf/releases/ModifiedMyPyramid.pdf>.