Nutrition advice is coming at us from every angle and it can be a challenge to sort through the noise to discern what we really should eat. The U.S. Dietary Guidelines (USDG) is a guidance system that has developed over the years to help us with these challenges. The Guidelines “provide recommendations based on current scientific knowledge about how dietary intake may reduce risk for major chronic diseases and how a healthful diet may improve nutrition.” (1) The Guidelines were first published in 1980 and are updated every five years.

MyPyramid is an educational food guidance system based on the USDG that was first released in conjunction with the 2005 USDG. It replaced a previously utilized food groups classification system and “food guide pyramid.” MyPyramid provides optimal nutrition guidelines for each food category.

Having a poor diet and sedentary lifestyle is linked to heart disease, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, osteoporosis, certain cancers, overweight, and obesity. Approximately 21 million people in the U.S. now have diabetes and, alarmingly over 55 million U.S. adults are pre-diabetic! (2,3) The approach provided by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and MyPyramid, is rooted in science offering suggestions to enhance the health of Americans. Modifying your diet can be daunting, however, making small changes can add up to a big health benefit.

One of the first places our minds jump to when thinking about dietary change is asking the question “what can be eliminated from my diet?” Many of the concerns about the diseases linked to poor diet can be improved, however, by actually including key foods in your diet versus excluding them. One key food to include is peanuts.

Population studies show that consuming peanuts and/or peanut butter in small amounts most days of the week can reduce the risk of heart disease by up to 50% and diabetes by 25%. (4,5) Peanuts have healthy fats, mono and polyunsaturated fat, which are good for cholesterol as opposed to bad fats (saturated and trans), which have negative effects on disease risk. Peanuts are also a good source of plant protein. Diets rich in plant protein have been shown to lower blood pressure as well as decrease the risk of heart disease. (6,7)

A study at Penn State showed that people who consume peanuts and peanut butter...
have diets with higher nutrient quality. People eating peanuts take in more fiber, vitamin E, magnesium, and potassium. These nutrients are considered “hard-to-get” in the population, but eating a small amount of peanuts or peanut butter daily makes getting these nutrients easy.

And, there is more good news because you do not have to give up peanuts if you are trying to lose or maintain your weight. Peanuts and peanut butter have been shown to keep you satisfied so you naturally forgo eating extra, empty calories throughout the day. Research out of Purdue University has shown that snacking on peanuts or peanut butter can keep hunger at bay five times as long as long as rice cakes, a high carbohydrate snack, which left participants hungry after just 30 minutes. Researchers believe it is a combination of the protein and fiber in peanuts and peanut butter that help to increase the feelings of fullness.

Let us explore what MyPyramid suggests, and how peanuts can boost health as a compliment to all categories of the pyramid. Peanuts can help you enjoy a balanced healthy diet. As you will notice, peanuts and peanut butter can be incorporated into many meals or snacks to enhance nutrition. Seldom do we eat one food item at a time. Many foods taste better and are more satisfying when combined or eaten together.

In taking a look at each guideline, incorporating peanuts or peanut butter is a simple step that can help you meet your nutrient needs each day and enjoy a balanced diet packed with nutrition! Here is how:

**Grains**

**Guideline:**
“Make half your grains whole.” Whole grains can reduce the risk of many chronic diseases and may help with weight maintenance. Combining them with peanuts can significantly boost this benefit since peanuts also contain those qualities. Research shows that peanuts are a satisfying snack that can aid in weight maintenance as well as stabilize blood sugar. They have a low glycemic index (GI) with a score of 14 out of 100. Compare this to pretzels with a score of 83. Many foods with a high GI can cause larger rises and falls in blood sugar, which can lead to a sluggish feeling. To tackle this, research shows that combining peanuts or peanut butter with your pretzels or other high GI meals and snacks can actually lower the peak of sugar in the blood.

**Try this:** A whole grain English muffin with peanut butter. Also, try stirring 1 tablespoon of peanut butter in your oatmeal or dipping whole grain pretzels in peanut butter.

**Vegetables**

**Guideline:**
“Vary your vegetables.” Vegetables may prevent stroke and other cardiovascular diseases, reduce the risk for type 2 diabetes, and protect against certain cancers. While you are working on eating the rainbow of veggies from orange to dark green, you can add peanuts and peanut butter for more flavor and longer lasting energy so you can make it to your next meal or snack. Since peanuts and peanut butter are so nutrient-rich, they will also significantly boost the nutrition that you get. The healthy fat in peanuts and peanut butter will also help you better absorb some of the nutrients in the vegetables, like vitamin E and carotenoids, because they are absorbed more easily with fat. The protein and fiber in peanuts and peanut butter make you feel more satisfied so you will not feel hungry.

**Try this:** Dipping carrots and celery in peanut butter for a guilt-free snack when those 3pm hunger pangs strike. Try making a peanut dressing for a Thai inspired salad, a peanut sauce for broccoli, or how about peanut-creamed spinach.

**Physical Activity**

**Guideline:**
“Find your balance between food and physical activity.” You should aim to be physically active for at least 30 minutes most days of the week and children and teenagers should be physically active for 60 minutes every day, or most days. Peanuts served prior to exercise can be helpful at providing long lasting energy since they have a healthy balance of nutrients that your body can utilize. They are also great to add to replenishment meals and snacks, as they are rich in many nutrients and protein.

**Try this:** Bring a peanut trail mix as a snack before an after school sporting event or end of the day workout. Try peanut butter on a whole grain waffle with slices of banana after a morning workout.
**Guideline:**
“Focus on Fruits.” A variety of fresh, frozen, canned, or dried fruit should be included daily in your diet for many of the same reasons as veggies. Combining peanuts or peanut butter with fruits can enhance nutrition and help you stay full until your next meal or snack.

**Try this:**
An apple sliced with peanut butter or a smoothie with banana and peanut butter. Adding chopped peanuts to a fruit salad or a dried fruit trail mix can keep hunger at bay longer than a plain fruit salad.

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**Guideline:**
“Get your calcium-rich foods.” We all know it is important to choose low-fat or fat-free dairy for strong bones to prevent osteoporosis. Well, peanut butter sandwiches are the number one sandwich type enjoyed with milk. Drinking fat-free milk with a peanut butter sandwich will also help you absorb more vitamin A and vitamin D, another key nutrients for health. So, how about shaking up the dairy choices by complementing them with peanuts and peanut butter?

**Try this:**
Sprinkle peanuts in your yogurt, melt peanut butter over low-fat frozen yogurt, or add peanut butter to a smoothie with low-fat or fat-free milk.

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**Guideline:**
“Go lean on protein.” Peanuts, which are commonly known as nuts, are scientifically classified as legumes, or beans. One reason is because they are high in plant protein, with more protein per serving than any other nut. One ounce, or about a handful of peanuts and 2 large spoonfuls (tablespoons) of peanut butter provide one-third to one-half of our daily protein needs; that is, about 7 grams and 8 grams, respectively according to U.S. Department of Agriculture data. Peanuts and peanut butter make wise protein choices, as they are cholesterol-free and lower in saturated fats than animal sources of protein and studies show that diets with increased plant protein reduced blood pressure and chronic disease risk. They can also add flavor to other protein choices, are well liked by children, and can be easy for older adults to eat when in the form of peanut butter.

**Try this:**
Create your own recipe for peanut soup, add crushed peanuts for a crunchy coating to chicken or fish, or try an Asian inspired marinade with peanut butter. Eating vegetarian? Boost the protein in your noodles by mixing in chopped peanuts or adding peanuts to a veggie stir-fry.

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**Guideline:**
“Know your fats.” The U.S. Dietary Guidelines as well as all major guideline groups recommend that 20 to 35 percent of your total daily calories should be from fat, with the majority coming from good unsaturated fat sources such as fish, nuts, and vegetable oils.(1) Peanuts, peanut butter, and peanut oil all contribute healthy oils to our diet. In fact, a study at Penn State showed that peanut oil and olive oil were similar in improving blood cholesterol levels and reducing heart disease risks. Peanuts and their oil also carry natural vitamin E and phytosterols, both of which are beneficial to disease risk.

**Try This:**
Try using peanut oil in your meal preparations or a peanut dressing for your salads. A handful of peanuts for a snack, a spoonful of peanut butter with a piece of fruit or carrot sticks can also provide healthy oils.
I Will Have Peanuts with MyPyramid

The bottom line? Have fun exploring ways to add peanuts and peanut butter to your day and combining them with foods MyPyramid encourages. We cannot fully predict what the new dietary recommendations will be in the future. However, it is a good idea to focus on getting the most out of calories by choosing a variety of nutrient rich foods, with healthy fats and protein, such as peanuts and peanut butter. So be creative while adding in peanuts and peanut butter to improve your diet and refer back to the tips to find suggestions on pairing them with other foods in MyPyramid to bring balance into your snacks and meals!

References