

Latin food the healthy way

YOU KNOW THE FOOD pyramid that Miss Miller went on and on about in your seventh-grade health class? Remember how it made absolutely no sense to you because—let's face it—no Latin family really eats broccoli and carrots for dinner. Well, like so many other things these days, that little pyramid just got a Latin makeover!

Despite its name, the Latino Nutrition Coalition's (LNC) Latin American Diet Pyramid is actually modeled on the Mediterranean diet, not the U.S. Department of Agriculture's food guide pyramid. It lets you know which foods you should incorporate into every meal and which you should consume daily or weekly, with an emphasis on our favorite staples, such as mangoes, avocados,

Yes, you can eat those frijoles and that pernil and still drop pounds.

Here's how.
By Lisa Fields



illas, chiles, beans, yuca, pork, shrimp and chicken. The nutritionist chose to use the triangular shape because “a pyramid is a universally recognized symbol for eating habits,” explains Courtney Davis, spokesperson for the Boston-based organization. “What better way to educate than with a symbol that’s already familiar?”

The Latin pyramid *does* incorporate many of the same healthy guidelines as the USDA pyramid, which is based on the 2005 U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans. That chart recommends that a 25-year-old female weighing 135 pounds eat 2 cups of fruit, 2½ cups of vegetables, 3 cups of milk, 6 ounces of grains and 5½ ounces of meat or beans daily.

But the Latin version is simpler, recommending frequency by food group: Fruits, vegetables and whole grains or beans should be eaten at every meal; poultry, seafood and dairy should be eaten daily; and red meat, eggs and sweets should be eaten weekly.

Worth noting

The best thing about this version is that because it reflects the foods Latinas actually eat, it can help get your diet into high gear. The key is well-balanced meals: Believe it or not, enchiladas, guacamole and *arroz con pollo* can be the backbone of a nutritious diet.

“Our foods are actually very healthy, and with a few twists and alterations,” says Chicago-based Sylvia Meléndez-Klinger, M.S., R.D. “Instead of using the traditional recipe for rice with a lot of oil, for example, use less oil and gradually reduce it to one tablespoon.”

In fact, multiple studies show that Hispanics who eat a traditional Latino diet consume more fruits, vegetables and fiber than those who eat a traditional American diet, which includes less produce, more prepackaged convenience foods and much fat and can

lead to weight gain, diabetes and heart disease. A 2004 University of California San Diego study found that people who were born in the U.S. and prefer to speak English over Spanish usually lean toward convenience foods, salty snacks and higher-fat foods.

And that means we’re getting fatter—which is exactly why the LNC recently launched the “Camino Mágico” campaign to help people make healthy choices with the Latin American Diet Pyramid. Download a brochure at latinonutrition.org or pick it up at a major supermarket.

When you reach into the cupboard and only have unhealthy options, you can’t eat right,” Davis says. “That’s why we’re trying to get the message into your hands at the supermarket, while decisions are being made.”

Smart choices

Here’s our aisle-by-aisle guide to healthy grocery shopping, Latin-style.

In the produce section, select traditional vegetables such as peppers, onions, tomatoes, tomatillos and chiles, as well as spinach, kale and lettuce. Pre-cut veggies can speed your food prep. Just wash everything, even if it says “prewashed” on the package; we don’t want you getting sick from mighty little microbes that held on all the way from the farm.

Make fruits such as bananas, avocados, mangoes, papayas, pineapples and berries staples in your diet. Buy fresh fruit in season and dried, frozen or canned fruits other times. “With canned fruits, buy the ones packed in juice, not the ones in heavy syrup,” Meléndez-Klinger says. The added sugar in the syrup could easily derail your diet if you’re not careful.

When picking starches, focus on whole grains: corn tortillas over white-flour ones and brown rice instead of yellow or white. Beans, yuca, *plátanos* and potatoes are good choices, too—just don’t fry them. And when you eat potatoes and bread, forgo the butter.

To keep seafood and poultry entrees healthy, step away from the frying pan. Try grilling, baking or broiling instead. And buy lean, skinless cuts of poultry.

The best dairy foods are low-fat or non-fat, such as fat-free sour cream and low-fat cheddar cheese. You’ll still get all the benefits of dairy, and most taste like the full-fat versions anyway.

Choose lean cuts of beef and lamb, and limit your consumption of red meat and eggs, which can raise cholesterol levels.

“You can substitute two egg whites for one egg if you want a little less cholesterol,” Meléndez-Klinger suggests for all you omelet lovers out there.

Reducing your sugar intake can go a long way toward dropping a few extra pounds. Try your

morning *cafecito* with cinnamon, nutmeg, vanilla or almond extract instead. Go ahead and indulge in sweets such as chocolate, cookies and pudding once a week, but have only a few spoonfuls. “If you know you’ll eat an entire row of cookies, don’t buy them,” Meléndez-Klinger says. Better yet, satisfy your sweet tooth with sugar-free gelatin and juicy fruit slices—your *caderas* will thank you.

Use salsa, *sofrito*, herbs and spices to add a kick of flavor without adding a ton of fat and calories.

Visit hearthealthcounts.com, or the Spanish Web site corazon.saludablecuenta.com, for more healthy Latin food tips, and see the USDA’s mypyramid.gov for personalized diet recommendations based on your age and weight. **E**



Latin American Diet Pyramid

Our at-a-glance overview of the new way to dine healthy—and drop a few pounds along the way. Study (and eat) up!