

What's on Your Plate? Eating Well and Losing Weight

For whatever reason, whether weight loss, cancer prevention or feeling better, let's assume you want to eat healthily. It's unlikely that you've *never* heard about the Food Pyramid, and you're bound to know by now that you need to add more whole grains, vegetables and fruits to your daily diet. But how do you apply sound nutritional guidelines to your daily life, meal after meal? Start out small—one plate at a time. Something as simple as looking at the array of foods on your plate can improve your eating habits for life!

Not a diet!

If you apply the suggestions below, referred to as “Plate Power” by *Prevention* magazine, you will not only be eating healthily, but you might find that you lose weight on this eating plan. The following guidelines allow you to eat plenty of food, even foods that some fad diets ban. According to Rita Smith, a registered dietician at Martha Jefferson Hospital in Charlottesville, Va., dinner is likely to be your largest meal with the most calories and the least restrained eating, so why not try this plan for the next three weeks, at dinner only, and see how easy and satisfying it is to eat right? Later, adding the changes to breakfast and lunch will be a ... well, a piece of cake!

As easy as 1-2-3

As you plan dinner tonight, consider these suggestions. Look at a 9- or 10-inch dinner plate. Your menu should fill a dinner plate divided into the following three sections:

1. ½ plate of fruits and vegetables
2. ¼ plate of protein (with meats, 3 to 4 ounces recommended—about the size of a deck of cards)
3. ¼ plate of starches (whole grains, pasta, rice, bread, potatoes, tortillas, beans*—maximum height of pile should be 1 inch). *Beans count as a protein, too.

According to the “Plate Power” principle, if you are still hungry after the first plate, allow yourself one more plate filled with fruits and vegetables only. Be sure to use oils, butter and other fatty toppings sparingly on any of the foods on your plate.

The American Institute of Cancer Research has a similar plan, called the “New American Plate.” If you find these plate divisions easier to apply, try this instead on your 9- to 10-inch plate:

1. 2/3 plate or more of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and beans
2. 1/3 plate or less of animal protein

Sample plates

The divided plates above leave plenty of freedom to choose from your favorite foods. Still need help getting started? See if any of these general menus give you ideas:

Traditional meat and potatoes

1. $\frac{1}{4}$ plate broccoli and $\frac{1}{4}$ plate apple and orange wedges
2. 3 to 4 ounces of grilled chicken, lightly drizzled with olive oil and favorite seasonings before grilling
3. 1 medium baked potato with low-fat toppings

Pasta combinations

1. $\frac{1}{4}$ plate plain pasta, maximum 1 inch height of pile, top with tomato sauce that includes red and yellow peppers and a small amount of lean ground beef (the sauce would not take up more than $\frac{1}{4}$ plate if eaten alone)
2. Fill the rest of your plate with your favorite melon and whole green beans.

What about junk food and dessert?

The menus above do not include food choices that are often called “bad” foods. Smith maintains that eating plans that do not allow your favorite treats in moderation might be so restrictive or punitive that you won’t stick to them. Dividing your plate does not mean banning french fries and other fattening foods. If you want to have chips with your lunch, limit the portion to the $\frac{1}{4}$ plate and 1-inch height maximum and the amount eaten is reasonable. Of course this means you’ve used up your starch limit for the meal, so put your tuna salad or turkey slices on a bed of lettuce rather than bread. Passing on the chips and opting for whole grain bread is highly recommended, but it’s fine to honor your cravings for treats occasionally and in moderation.

Eating out and having fun

Here is a sample way to apply the divided plate guidelines at a restaurant and still enjoy yourself:

1. $\frac{1}{4}$ plate of french fries
2. no more than $\frac{1}{2}$ plate of grilled chicken salad—low-fat dressing on the side to dip into (eye the chicken portion—only eat $\frac{1}{4}$ plate’s worth)
3. $\frac{1}{4}$ plate of whatever side fruit or vegetable is offered that appeals to you—try to avoid creamed vegetables

When asked about snacks and desserts, Smith advises you *not* to make any other changes in your eating habits until you see whether you lose weight with regular application of the divided plate at dinner. She believes that most Americans eat much larger portions of starch and protein than the “Plate Power” plan allows. This cut in calories most likely will result in some weight loss if you do not add those calories elsewhere in snacks you don’t usually eat. Smith still cautions you to be moderate in your choices and portions when it comes to snacks and desserts.

And the Food Pyramid?

If you take this one small step—just eyeing your plate and filling it with special attention to portions, you can’t help but eat healthier, but is the change enough to meet your nutritional needs? You

certainly will be eating plenty of fruits and vegetables—this alone improves most people’s diets radically. The USDA advises you to choose half your starches each day from whole grain breads, pastas, cereals, etc. and to consume low- and non-fat dairy products daily as well. Be sure to consult your doctor, however, if you have health concerns that dietary changes might interfere with. You can also meet with a registered dietician if you need more specific counseling regarding fats, calcium and other minerals, sodium, sugar, etc. Remember, try the plan for dinner only, for just three weeks. As you discover how easy and satisfying the divided plate plan is, you might want to try it at other meals.

Resources

The American Dietetic Association’s Complete Food and Nutrition Guide *by Roberta Larson Duyff, MS. Wiley, John and Sons Inc, 1998.*

The New American Plate Booklet. *The American Institute of Cancer Research. 2000. www.aicr.org*

The American Dietetic Association
www.eatright.org

Sources: Janis Jibrin (April, 2002) “Plate Power.” *Prevention*, 150-155; Rita Smith, registered dietician and certified diabetes educator, Martha Jefferson Hospital, Charlottesville, Va.

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