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off duty

THE MILITARY LEISURE TIME MAGAZINE

GETTING FIT IN YOUR KITCHEN

How to take your kitchen from fat to fit, one step at a time

Home decorating

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PACIFIC

Bringing FITNESS into your home

BY ERIC MINTON



THE PICTURE CUBE/MICHAEL A. KELLER

It's one of my favorite, easy-fix dinners: butter slices plopped on top of skinless chicken pieces sprinkled liberally with garlic powder and Italian seasonings and baked. Tonight, I used extra virgin olive oil instead of butter. While that didn't cut my fat intake

(I've already lopped off a lot of fat by skinning the chicken), the highly saturated fat of butter is loaded with nasty cholesterol, whereas the oil is a monounsatu-

rated fat with no cholesterol. Flavor, not health, is my ultimate goal. I've never been one to compare calories, grasp grams, fixate on fiber or vegetable for vitamins. My food heritage is Deep Fried South. My favorite vegetable is green beans simmered in salt water for an hour obliterating whatever healthful qualities they once held, then stirring in a heap of bacon grease. Arteries choke up at the mere scent. When I married an amateur cuisinologist, her gourmet tendencies added even more richness to my diet. Our kitchen remains one of the stalwart bastions of pre-health-storic cooking, neanderthal in this age of low-fat, high-fiber consciousness.

Yet, this is the kitchen we're converting into a model for healthy eating, or at least an example of the small but meaningful steps you can take in your kitchen to improve your diet. In fact,

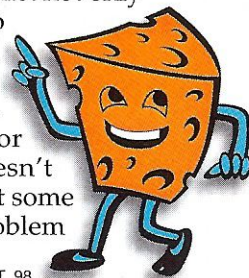
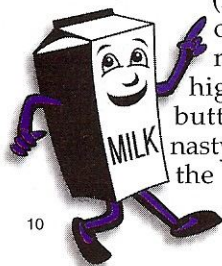
lesson number one is to take small steps, not giant leaps into some faddish eating regimen.

"By making the changes gradually, you incorporate (healthy eating) into your lifestyle and it's not so challenging," said Capt. Wendy Larson, manager of nutrition programs for the 89th Medical Group at Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland. She and her fellow military nutrition counselors — Maj. Vicky Thomas, nutrition staff officer in the Army's Office of the Surgeon General, and Lt. Cmdr. Karen Al-Koshnaw, assistant head of the nutrition management department at Naval Medical Center Portsmouth, Virginia — said steering people away from fast-acting futility and into life-lasting habits is their biggest challenge.

"People don't want to hear they can change eating habits slowly," Larson said. "They say, 'Tell me what I can eat to lose weight tomorrow.'"

But losing weight should be only part of your nutritional goals. With a good diet you can strengthen your bones, muscles and other organs. You might also live longer. Five major causes of death can be linked to diet: heart disease, stroke, coronary artery disease, some cancers, and non-insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus. But as Thomas pointed out, a good diet not only may add days to your life, it can add hours to your day in the way of energy.

"The motivation for eating healthier doesn't have to be to prevent some long-term health problem



in the future," she said. "Eating healthy makes you feel better."

She gives her clients a simple challenge: for the next two weeks, eat the daily recommended five servings of vegetables and fruit instead of vending machine fare and lunchmeats.

Col. Esther F. Myers, chief consultant to the Air Force Surgeon General for nutrition and Dietetics called fruits (apples, oranges, grapes, bananas) and vegetables (carrots, celery, broccoli, cucumbers) "the original fast food."

She is a member of the Department of Defense Nutrition Committee comprising diet experts from the four branches and the Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA), part of a DoD-wide effort to promote healthy eating among military members and their families. The campaign has brought healthier choices to chow halls, consumer education literature to commissaries, and nutrition counseling through hospitals and health and wellness centers.

Though some people on doctors' orders need to carefully monitor their intake of fat, sodium, and calories for health and obesity problems, the rest of us need to make some effort to decrease the fat and sodium in our daily diet while increasing fiber, vitamins such as folic acid, and minerals such as calcium, iron and zinc.

We also need to beware of getting too much of a good thing: Vitamin A promotes healthy skin, but too much dries the skin and causes liver damage; iron boosts oxygen transport and therefore energy in working muscles, but too much has been linked to colon cancer and heart disease.

Confusing, isn't it? Furthermore, I, for one, don't want to prepare my meals with a calculator, punching in how much fat this meat has vs. how many vitamins I ate at breakfast. Who has the time or inclination in today's military lifestyle to track grams?

The simple solution is to use the food pyramid as your guide to cooking and shopping. "It's an easy tool that says, in general, 'how does my diet compare with what I should be eating,'" said Larson. The pyramid has six rooms on four levels:

- Grains occupy the entire ground floor with 6 to 11 daily servings of bread, cereal, rice or pasta;
- Neighbors on level two are veg-

etables (3 to 5 servings) and fruits (2 to 4 servings);

- The dairy family lives on level three (2 to 3 servings of milk, yogurt or cheese) next door to the animal and legumes (2 to 3 servings of meat, poultry, fish, eggs, dry beans, or nuts);

- Fats, oils, sweets, and add-ons like mayonnaise and dressing play in the penthouse.

Don't start at the top (what building does?); start at the bottom. "Starches and breads, that's what you should base your food intake around," said Al-Koshnaw. "Start with pasta and rice, and then build a meal around it."

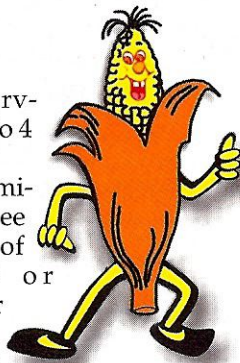
"You add to your base what fruits and vegetables go with that meal," Thomas said. "Then you pick your meat, and it doesn't have to be meat. We talk in terms of meat group," which includes beans and nuts.

You can top it off with fats, oils and sweets, but just a little. "Don't eliminate entirely, but add sparingly," said Larson. "It can add flavor but not nutrition."

This reverses most Americans' thinking. I start most days pulling that night's beef, pork or chicken out of the freezer to thaw, then right before cooking do I choose the accompaniments. Most American restaurant menus don't categorize choices according to bread, rice, potatoes and noodles; it's beef, poultry, pork and "from the sea."

But by starting at the bottom, you front load your diet with the fibers of grain and the minerals and vitamins in fruits and vegetables. By the time you get to level three, you'll eat enough dairy and meat products to get your calcium and iron but not overdo the fat. Best of all, the pyramid demands variety. You don't need to give up meat; just eat smaller portions or make it an ingredient in something else, such as stir-fry, soups, tortillas, lasagna or casseroles.

You should also think daily intake instead of individual meals, and again apply the pyramid. If you



"GETTING FIT IN THE COMMISSARY"

- Healthy cooking starts with healthy shopping. Following are some tips for your next trip to the commissary or local supermarket.

- Don't shop when you're hungry. "How many of us have gone after work Friday to pick up a couple of things and walk out \$80 later?" said Capt. Wendy Larson, manager of nutrition programs for the 89th Medical Group at Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland.

- Only bring enough money for what you can afford rather than loading up and writing a check. One trick is to set a dollar limit for your final total, then round the price of each item up to the next dollar: a 98 cent box of hash browns counts as \$1, a \$1.10 can of mushrooms tallies as \$2. This allows for sales tax, the commissary surcharge and bagger's tip, helps you make healthy choices between foods, cuts down on impulse purchases, and makes for less wasteful shopping.

- "Since most of us buy the same food over and over, make a shopping list and photocopy it," suggested Maj. Vicky Thomas, nutrition staff officer in the Army's Office of the Surgeon General. Leave blank spaces at the bottom for special items. Thomas also suggested ordering the list according to the store's layout, and you can also clip your coupons to the list.

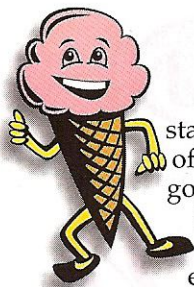
- Fresh is a better choice than processed food. Fresh fruits and vegetables have higher fiber content than canned, said Col. Esther F. Myers, chief consultant to the Air Force Surgeon General for nutrition and dietetics. However, "frozen vegetables are as good if not better than fresh, because they are picked and processed immediately," said Lt. Cmdr. Karen Al-Koshnaw, assistant head of the nutrition management department at the Naval Medical Center Portsmouth, Virginia.

- "But prepare to address reality," Larson said. "Folks are very busy, so if you're going to rely on convenience, choose healthier convenience." And that means ...

- Read labels. Don't read every label on everything you buy. "That's impossible and frustrating," Larson said. "Start with things you eat all the time and get to know those." Look for the serving size then compare calories and fat. Labels can also help you monitor your cholesterol and sodium intake. "Know what your goals are," Larson said. "Label reading is important, especially if you are trying to achieve a certain goal."

- Think food pyramid as you shop and look ahead. You're shopping for breakfasts, lunches (at home, school and work), suppers and snacks. With all that in mind, start your shopping list with grains, then add the vegetables and fruits, then list dairy products, meats and legumes. Then think twice as you reach for the sweets, oils, butter, dressings and other fats.

- Buy one new healthy item per trip. Try a fat-free brand of a favorite food, check out a new vegetable or fruit, forego a certain meat and get fish instead, or just this once buy lean Canadian bacon instead of fatty bacon strips. If you end up liking that one item, you've just taken a big step toward a healthier diet.



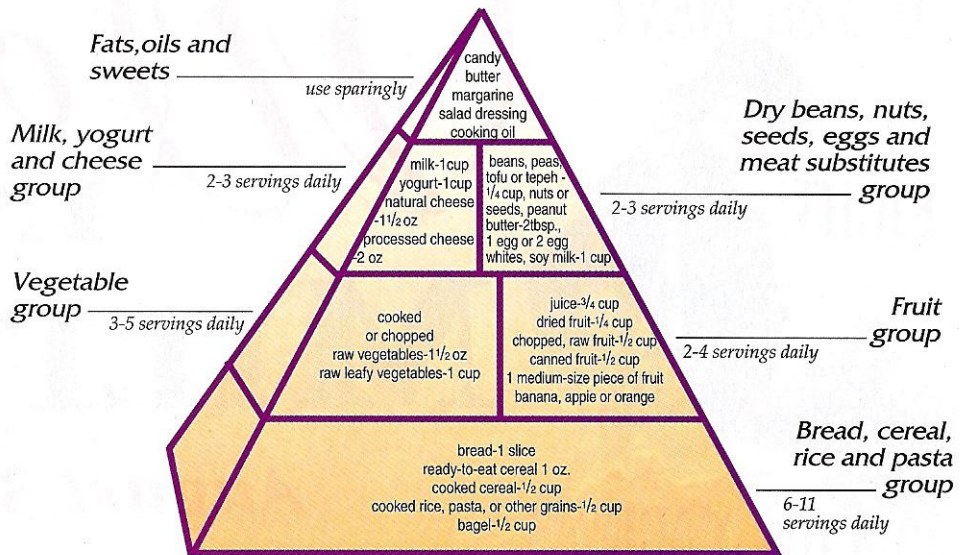
start your day with a bowl of cereal and fruit, you've got a full pyramid to draw from for lunch and dinner. If you start with eggs and bacon/sausage, you've done level three, so concentrate on grains, fruits and vegetables the rest of the day.

If you know you're having steak for dinner tonight, forego the hamburger for lunch. Nutritionists, by the way, recommend at least three meals a day, especially breakfast. A morning meal, even a bagel and orange juice on the run, kick starts the body's metabolism which helps you burn more calories during the day, keeps blood-sugar levels even and prevents overeating later in the day.

Munchies are OK, too, as long as they fit the pyramid. "There's a big difference between a planned snack and unconscious grazing," Larson said. "Snacking is not bad. When you get hungry, that's what your body is supposed to do. But have something planned instead of, 'Oh, there's donuts on the counter.'"

Thomas used the pyramid to create a healthy football weekend spread. Substitute baked tortilla chips and sal-

Food Guide Pyramid for Vegetarian Meal Planning



Source: National Center for Nutrition and Dietetics, The American Dietetic Association
Based on the USDA Food Guide Pyramid

sa for fried potato chips and dip. "There you have a low-fat bread and vegetable snack," she said, one that adds zest to the table. Put a plate of baby carrots on the table and a bowl of grapes (think Roman noblemen watching the gladiators). Keep the pretzels (a grain). Replace chicken wings with strips of chicken tenderloin rolled in breadcrumbs or crushed Corn Flakes, baked and topped with chicken wing sauce. "There I have the spiciness I like and the chicken I like," Thomas said, but not the fat.

Inside the pyramid, try to replace fatty items with a lower fat alternative. If you like ice cream, try a fat-free version. "My father lost a lot of weight just by changing to fat-free ice cream," Al-Koshnaw said. If you don't like the taste of one fat-free brand, try another. If none tastes good, go back to your vice, but fit it into your pyramid plan and look to cut fat somewhere else.

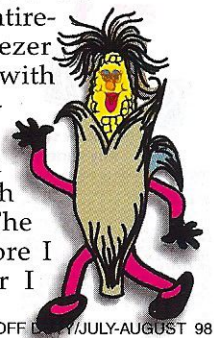
Another small step is to give up one fat a day. "If you gave up a pat of butter a day, you would lose over four pounds in a year," Al-Koshnaw said. The nutritionists, noting the busy military lifestyle, acknowledged that while processed foods tend to be higher in fat and sodium, such mixes make dinners possible for many families.

So, if you are using a packaged

dish, like macaroni and cheese or potato mixes, cut in half or drop altogether the butter or margarine called for in the instructions, or replace it with a similar amount of canola, olive or peanut oil, which are highest in monounsaturated fats and lowest in saturated fats.

Altering methods of cooking can also cut your fat intake while increasing nutrition. Try baking, broiling or grilling instead of frying. Remove the skin from chicken and trim fat off pork and beef. Vegetables hold their color, nutrients, and taste better when steamed or microwaved rather than boiled. Substitute herbs, spices or lemon juice for butter or margarine as a flavor enhancer.

So, with this guidance and the food pyramid in mind, I first visited the commissary, loaded up on fresh fruits and frozen vegetables, stocked up on pasta, rices, stuffing mixes and cereal, and bypassed the meat department entirely because my freezer was already filled with enough great commissary buys in chicken, beef and pork to last a month in my new diet. The next morning, before I opened the freezer I



"SERVINGS"

What is a serving? Is one woman's serving another man's hors d'oeuvres? In dietician terms, servings vary. Some are self-explanatory: one apple is one serving, one cup of milk (8 fluid ounces) is a serving. But for other items, it's not so clear cut. Two eggs equal one serving. Is a large grapefruit one or two servings?

"A serving on the pyramid is pretty small," said Maj. Vicky Thomas, nutrition staff officer in the Army's Office of the Surgeon General. A slice of bread or half a bagel is one serving, as is one ounce of ready-to-eat cereal. "A large bowl of cereal could be three to four servings," Thomas said. To know for sure, after pouring cereal in a bowl, pour it into a measuring cup one time.

Canned and packaged foods include serving sizes on their labels, and you can use these as a guide. For fresh fruits, go one for one. For fresh vegetables, a half cup chopped counts as a serving. Two to three ounces is considered a serving of lean meat, poultry or fish, so a 6-ounce steak fills your daily dose of that group.

If that seems like too little to fill your appetite, remember that you are probably overloading your diet with meat anyway while cheating yourself of the other food groups. When you balance it all out, you'll still fill up, and feel better, too.

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— Capt. Wendy Larson

chose my grain (a mushroom and wild-rice stuffing mix), decided to accompany that with green beans and only then did I take the chicken thighs out to thaw.

For breakfast I had a grapefruit and two bowls of cereal with milk. For lunch I ate a couple of fruit cereal bars and a bowl of grapes. In preparing supper, not only did I use olive oil for the chicken instead of butter, I microwaved the beans and stirred in a teaspoon of gourmet-grade extra virgin olive oil rather than a glob of bacon grease.

The stuffing mix called for a 1/4 cup of butter or margarine; I used half that amount of margarine (big sacrifice here; I love butter). The stuffing turned out a little dry, but I could have added more water per the instructions. The chicken was great as always, and the green beans—well, the bacon-grease-soaked version now has a rival for favorite veggie. I had two helpings of everything.

The day's pyramid tally: 10 servings of the bread group, 3 servings of the fruit group, 2 servings of the vegetable group, 2 servings of the dairy group, 4 servings of the meat group and margarine and oil used sparingly. I missed the vegetable target, and went over the meat recommendation (that second helping of chicken did me in, figuratively and, as it turned out from my subsequent bloated feeling, literally). But compare that with what had been a diet of bagels with butter or cream cheese and fruit for breakfast, two burritos with sour cream for lunch, and dinners of thick meats, rich sauces and vegetables swimming in butter. I've made that step.

"Don't assume this is going to be terribly difficult," said Larson. "Find easy things to change first." ■

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