

# Food Groups: The Basics

By Liz Applegate

*This article is adapted from the book, Eat Smart, Play Hard, by Liz Applegate.*

You are not the average person. You're the above-average person. You walk, swim, run, cycle, lift weights, play golf, or do some other type of physical exercise on a regular basis. You play hard, so you need more calories, more protein, and more nutrients than the average sedentary person. To know how much and what types of food you should eat, you need a different plan. That's why I designed the Play Hard Pyramid specifically for your fit lifestyle.

In 1992, the USDA unveiled its Food Guide Pyramid as a replacement for the outdated Four Basic Food Groups, which had been in place since the mid-1950s. The USDA based its pyramid design on the needs of average people, most of whom have no regular exercise program. The hope was that the pyramid would help put the US government's dietary guidelines into common practice. Today, however, the Food Guide Pyramid is as outdated as the Four Food Groups. Numerous nutritional advances place the pyramid in desperate need of an overhaul, especially for the fitness-minded.

- The government placed all fats at the top of its pyramid in the "eat sparingly" section. Yet much research done since 1992 has found that not all fats are evil. In fact, many fats, such as the type found in chocolate, nuts, and cooking oils, are actually good for your heart. Even more important, you need fats to fuel your active lifestyle. Research has found that the right types of fat will boost endurance and immunity and keep your joints well-lubricated. That's why I've split fats into two categories: healthful fats that you can eat three or more servings of a week, and unhealthy snack foods that you should eat sparingly.
- The government's pyramid lumps all carbohydrate into one big category at the base of the pyramid. Not all carbohydrate is created equal, however. Whole grains such as whole wheat bread, barley, quinoa, millet, and oatmeal provide nutrients that prevent sore muscles as well as heart disease. I've split the carbohydrate group in half to call attention to the whole grains. I've also bumped up your number of servings to 8 to 15, from the USDA's recommended 6 to 11 servings.
- The Food Guide Pyramid doesn't address the need for fluids. When you play hard, you sweat a lot, which is why I've put fluids close to the base of the Play Hard Pyramid.
- The USDA also doesn't include healthy snacks in its pyramid. Energy bars, gels, sports drinks, and performance foods such as Gummi Bears and fig bars deserve a spot on the Play Hard Pyramid.

In short, people who play hard need to eat smarter than the average couch potato. Keep the Play Hard Pyramid in mind when making your food choices each day. It should serve as a general guide, regardless of your age, gender, weight, or the type of exercise you're planning. You'll have to make some modifications based on these factors, and you'll find out how to do just that in the following chapters. Here's a closer look at the nine food groups that make up the Play Hard Pyramid.

# The Nine Fitness Food Groups

The government's pyramid includes only six food groups. The Play Hard Pyramid bumps that number up to the following nine that are fine-tuned to meet your fitness needs.

## Carbohydrate-Packed Foods

When you exercise, your muscles burn a type of carbohydrate called glycogen for fuel. To keep these important fuel levels optimal, you must eat a diet rich in grains, beans, potatoes, and other types of high-carbohydrate foods. Grains also contain important B vitamins such as thiamin, riboflavin, and niacin that your muscles need to convert the carbohydrate you eat into energy. Enriched refined grain products made from white flour, such as crackers, white rice, and pasta, do supply these B vitamins, but you should focus on whole grains such as whole wheat bread, quinoa, and brown rice, which also provide the fiber you need for a healthy heart and digestive tract. Despite popular belief, beans count as a high-carbohydrate food.

**Amount needed:** 8 to 15 daily servings. At least half of your daily servings should come from whole grains and at least five weekly servings should come from beans.

## Fluids

The more you exercise, the more you sweat, and if you don't replace those lost fluids, you'll soon become dehydrated. Besides hurting your performance, chronic dehydration also increases your risk for kidney stones and bladder cancer. If you're watching your weight, go for water most of the time. During long workouts, however, you need a sports drink that contains carbohydrate and electrolytes.

**Amount needed:** 10 to 12 servings a day of water or other fluids such as fruit juice or sports drink.

## Vegetables

Exercise makes you breathe hard; the harder you breathe, the more oxygen your lungs suck in. And while you need oxygen to sustain life, this gas tends to be unstable inside the body. Unstable oxygen molecules can oxidize, which may damage your muscle cells and set the stage for heart disease and cancer. Damaged muscle cells also bring on inflammation and soreness, which make your next workout feel harder than it should.

You can counteract oxidation by eating healthful amounts of antioxidants, substances found in dark, leafy greens; red peppers; tomatoes; winter squash; pumpkins; carrots; and other colorful produce. Fresh, frozen, or canned vegetables all supply a wealth of nutrients.

**Amount needed:** Four to six servings daily. Include two or more antioxidant-rich selections such as bok choy and spinach.

## Fruits

Brightly colored fruits such as berries, kiwifruits, and oranges contain loads of antioxidants and other phytochemicals. Fruit juice counts, but you'll get more cholesterol-lowering fiber and other nutrients from whole fruits.

**Amount needed:** Three to five servings daily. At least half of them should be antioxidant powerhouses such as mango, pineapple, and cantaloupe.

## Protein Powerhouses

Fit people need more protein (80 or more grams a day) than flabby people do. This macronutrient is especially important after your workouts, when your body repairs muscle damage and shuttles energy back to your muscles. So include soy, fish, eggs, and lean meat in your postworkout meals. Lean meat, especially beef, is loaded with zinc, a mineral that most people need to get more of in their diets. And soy, fish, and other types of meat provide iron and other trace minerals such as copper and manganese that your body needs, especially during heavy training.

**Amount needed:** Two to four 2- to 3-ounce servings a day. Eat fish one or two times a week for its healthy omega-3 fats.

## Calcium-Rich Foods

Consuming dairy products is the easiest way to ensure that you're getting plenty of bone-strengthening calcium. As a bonus, dairy products also offer a good dose of protein. If you don't eat dairy, select calcium-fortified soy products or other calcium-rich foods such as calcium-fortified orange juice or cereal. Aim for at least one soy product daily that supplies about 10 grams of protein.

**Amount needed:** Two to three servings daily.

## Healthy Fats

The fat found in nuts, avocados, olives and olive oil, canola oil, and flaxseed and flaxseed oil is actually quite good for your heart. Additional research shows that these healthful fats may fight inflammation and muscle soreness and may even boost immunity.

Use healthy fats in place of heart-clogging saturated and trans fats such as margarine and butter. Snack on a handful of nuts instead of potato chips. Use avocado as a spread on bread instead of margarine or butter. Cook with olive or canola oil instead of margarine. And try flaxseed oil along with seasonings for an eat-smart salad dressing. Flaxseed oil also supplies a healthy dose of omega-3 fats, which are the same fats found in fish.

But be warned: All types of fat contain more calories per gram than either carbohydrate or protein do, so if you're watching your weight, you should watch your intake.

**Amount needed:** Three or more servings a week.

## Healthy Snacks

If you exercise for more than an hour at a time, you'll need to consume energy bars, gels, sports drinks, or other performance foods to fuel your fitness. Found in some health food stores, and sports stores, products such as PowerBar, High5, and SIS contain easily digestible carbohydrate. They also make great pre- and post-run snacks. Most bars have 30 or more grams of carbohydrate; most gels contain about 25 grams. Foods such as Gummi Bears, fig bars, dried fruit, and honey also supply fast, digestible carbohydrate.

**Amount needed:** 30 to 60 grams per hour of exercise.

## **Junk Food**

Chips, cake, soda, and doughnuts are not recommended foods. They offer too few nutrients and too many calories and are likely to contain either saturated or trans fats, two of your biggest artery cloggers. But let's face it, one of the reasons you exercise is to eat the foods you love. So munching on cookies or fatty snack foods now and then is not a huge deal as long as these foods don't become dietary staples.

**Amount needed:**        One unhealthy snack or fewer per day.