

Beyond Food Pyramids: Global Evidence, Local Plates

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Food-based dietary guidelines have been used for decades as a keystone of public health nutrition. In many countries, food pyramids and plate-based models were developed and used as visual guides to complement nutrition education and health promotion programmes, helping societies understand healthy eating in an accessible manner. Such tools were not intended to prescribe identical diets across nations, but rather to translate nutritional information into culturally appropriate and food system specific guidance.

The recent release of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) 2025-2030 has prompted a public debate internationally, including Malaysia. Much of the discourse centers on the perceived shifts in dietary emphasis, particularly stronger focus on “real food”, dietary patterns and the reduction of ultra-processed foods. It places increasing emphasis on food quality, encouraging higher intake of fruits and vegetables, protein foods, dairy and healthy fats, while reducing the intake of refined grains and added sugars.

The move has been made mainly due to the rising burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) including obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases, conditions that similarly affect Malaysia. While both countries share broad public health objectives, food-based guidelines cannot be imported from other countries. By design, dietary guidelines must be grounded based on local cultural practices, food availability, economic realities and lifestyle contexts.

Malaysia revised its national dietary guidance including the food pyramid with the launch of the Malaysian Dietary Guidelines (MDG) 2020. Its emphasis is more on limiting added sugars, particularly sugar-sweetened beverages and processed food, while promoting whole foods, fruits and vegetables, lean protein sources and whole grains. These recommendations are well aligned with contemporary nutrition science and reflect local evidence. Importantly, Malaysian Dietary Guidelines are framed within the context of multicultural society with distinct staple foods

and established culinary traditions which differ substantially from Western countries.

Under the MDG 2020, the Malaysian Healthy Plate, commonly known as ‘*Suku-Suku Separuh*’, remains relevant and practical tool for public nutrition education. The model, which guides plate portions to include one quarter carbohydrates, one quarter protein and half fruits and vegetables, emphasizing food quality, healthier choices and portion control. This approach directly addresses a major local challenge which is carbohydrate-heavy meals particularly rice, without demonizing staple foods or undermining cultural dietary identity but reinforcing moderation and balance.

Malaysia’s current national food policy together with its food based dietary guidelines and the healthy plate framework are already on the right trajectory. The pressing challenge does not lie in redesigning the food pyramid or adopting foreign models, but in strengthening execution, consistency and public awareness within an increasing obesogenic food environment. The widespread availability of ultra-processed foods, frequent eating out and aggressive food marketing continue to undermine healthy eating efforts. Coordinated actions across ministries, health professionals and industry stakeholders on healthy eating and nutrition promotion are needed to realize the vision for a healthy Malaysia.

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