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HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL ADVISER

The case for eating poultry

BY THE FACULTY OF
HARVARD MEDICAL
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Q: I recently saw Harvard's Healthy Eating Plate and noticed that poultry was listed as a healthy protein. I am not surprised that you're recommending fish, nuts or beans. But why poultry?

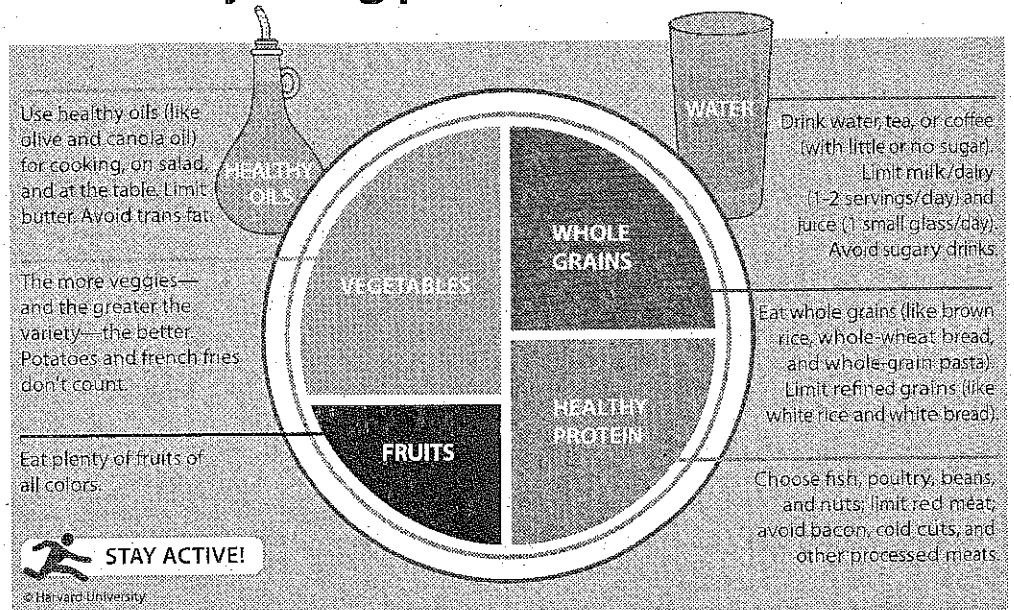
A: While fish, nuts and beans are by far the healthiest proteins you can add to your diet, poultry does have an advantage over beef, lamb and pork. The main reason Harvard's Healthy Eating Plate lists chicken and turkey as healthy sources of protein is that they have relatively low levels of saturated fat compared with red meat. From a nutritional point of view, beef, lamb and pork are all classified as red meats.

There is about half as much saturated as unsaturated fat in chicken and turkey. By comparison, beef and pork contain a good deal more saturated fat than chicken and turkey and less unsaturated fat.

Of course, the amount of saturated fat — and, for that matter, other nutrients — in a particular dish is going to vary, depending on the cut of meat and how it's cooked. But even after accounting for these differences, chicken and turkey dishes will almost always contain less saturated fat than red meat dishes. That's because chicken and turkey have so much less saturated fat than red meat to begin with.

What's the rap on saturated fat? It increases heart attack and stroke risk when compared to healthy fats. "Healthy fats" means the monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fat in fish, olive oil and other vegetable oils. This does not include trans fat, most of which is artificially

The healthy eating plate



Harvard School of Public Health
The Nutrition Source
www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource

Harvard Medical School
Harvard Health Publications
www.health.harvard.edu

While the U.S. Department of Agriculture's MyPlate fails to give people some of the basic nutrition advice they need to choose a healthy diet, the Healthy Eating Plate is based exclusively on the best available science and was not subjected to political and commercial pressures from food industry lobbyists.

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oil. Trans fat is even worse than saturated fat when it comes to increasing heart disease and stroke risk.

One important point of clarification: Saying that chicken is a healthful protein should not be interpreted as an endorsement of chicken nuggets or other prepared fried chicken dishes as some kind of health food. This couldn't be further from the truth.

Most chicken nuggets are coated with a batter that is made from processed white flour and contains lots of salt. The exact ingredients vary depending on the brand or restaurant, but it's a safe bet that very little, if any, whole grain is used in these preparations. And most will be high in fat because of the way they are processed or prepared. When the Healthy Eating Plate

as healthy proteins, it is referring to baked poultry, preferably skinless to reduce fat.

A quick summary of other recommendations made on the Healthy Eating Plate includes the following advice:

■ Make half your meal vegetables and fruits. Go for variety. And keep in mind that potatoes and French fries don't count.

■ Choose whole grains whenever you can. Limit refined grains, like white rice and white bread, because they produce a rapid rise in blood sugar.

■ Pick the healthiest sources of protein, such as fish, poultry, beans and nuts; cut back on red meat; avoid bacon, cold cuts and other processed meats.

■ Healthy oils (like olive and canola oil) are good for you. Don't be afraid to use

and at the table.

■ Drink water, tea or coffee. Milk and dairy are not must-have foods; limit them to one to two servings a day. Go easy on juice. Avoid sugary drinks.

■ And stay active!
Chicken can be part of a good, healthy diet — a diet that reduces your risk of disease and helps control your weight. But chicken and most other foods can be junked up and made unhealthy, depending on how they are prepared. Even within the realm of healthy proteins, you still need to assess healthfulness on a case-by-case basis. Remember, too, that your overall, long-term dietary pattern is what matters most, not a wing or thigh here and there.

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