

Take the 'Magic Road' to a healthy Latino diet

New food-pyramid pamphlet touts Latin-American staples to fight obesity



Matthew Alacon, 1, plays at the register as clerk Jessica Martinez, right, checks out Isabel Mendoza's groceries at a grocery store in Houston. On display in the foreground are bilingual supermarket shopping guides, "Camino Magico," which feature a new food pyramid designed to encourage Latinos to make healthier food choices with traditional foods are on display.

Pat Sullivan / AP

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HOUSTON - A new food pyramid, designed to encourage Latinos to eat healthier, touts the staples of traditional Latin-American cooking as the path to better nutrition.

The Latin American Diet Pyramid emphasizes the benefits of grains and tubers such as maize, quinoa and plantains, and tropical fruits such as mangos and papayas. It's featured in a pocket-sized bilingual shopping guide set for distribution nationwide.

The 16-page pamphlet, called "Camino Magico" or Magic Road, is the centerpiece of a campaign launched Tuesday by the Latino Nutrition Coalition, a Boston-based nonprofit dedicated to improving Latino [eating habits](#).

The basic message is: The old ways are the best ways.

The pamphlet teaches shoppers to choose fresh [fruits and vegetables](#) and whole grains over processed or prepared foods. It also offers a shopping list and meal ideas that incorporate healthier versions of traditional dishes, such as a bean tortilla

melt, arroz con pollo and Mexican chicken soup.

“We’re trying to get people talking about what we should be eating, and to focus on more traditional and healthier foods rather than big quantities of cheap food,” said Liz Mintz, manager of the Latino Nutrition Coalition. “We wanted to create awareness in the community and inspire people to eat healthy.”

The supermarket guide, which is now available in some stores and churches in Dallas and Houston, will eventually be distributed in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, Miami and Boston, Mintz said.

Number of obese Latinos rising The coalition, whose parent company Oldways Preservation Trust created [the Mediterranean Diet](#), developed the Latin American Diet Pyramid as a way to combat high rates of obesity, diabetes and heart disease in the Hispanic community.

Obesity rates among Latinos in the U.S. doubled between 1991 and 2001, from 11.6 percent to 23.7 percent. About 23 percent of Hispanic men are obese, while 27.5 percent of women are obese — higher rates than those of non-Hispanics.

Latinos are also two times more likely to have diabetes, and to suffer from diabetes-related illness such as kidney and eye disease.

The ailments, like poor eating habits, seem to increase with immigration, studies have found. “Five years after people immigrate, their weight goes up drastically,” Mintz said. “The more acculturated Hispanics are, the more problems we are seeing.”

The trend can be reversed, said John Foreyt, director of the Behavioral Medicine Research Center at Baylor College of Medicine.

“This is a quick, sensible way of helping Latinos. It’s getting back to the old ways, and maintaining their culture, rather than shifting to something else,” he said. “It’s not just a diet, but the Latino lifestyle — eating with your family, eating home-cooked meals.”

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