Making Your Plate Great with the Food Exchange System

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The following program was originally featured as the 2015 Area Captains program and has been modified for chapter use at TOPS chapter meetings.
Have you ever been on a diet? Are you ready to stop dieting and start eating the foods you enjoy in the amounts that are just right for you?

The Food Exchange System can help you do just that. As you probably already know, TOPS is not about dieting or selling you a food plan. It’s about giving you the support and tools you need to make lasting changes that make sense for you. There is no one-size-fits-all meal plan that works for everyone, but the Exchange System is customizable to your unique needs.

If you’ve tried to follow the Exchange System, you may have found it a little complicated. It’s true that the Exchange System takes a little work up front by you to get it going. The important thing to remember is that you don’t need to know absolutely everything about the Exchange System to make it work for you. Think about when you first decided to lose weight. Did you expect to know exactly what and how much to eat, how often to exercise, how to manage cravings and how to stay motivated overnight? Probably not.

Hopefully, you’ve learned that, in order to make lasting change, you have to start with small steps. We’ll take one small step to better understanding the Exchange System today by creating our own dinner plate.
First, a little history lesson. The Exchange System was created in 1950 as a group effort by the American Diabetes Association, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and the United States Public Health Service. Historically, the Exchange System has been used to plan eating patterns for people with diabetes.

Eating at appropriate intervals throughout the day is key to maintaining good blood sugar control in diabetics. But these meal-planning techniques also help promote the feeling of fullness and can be helpful to anyone who wants to lose weight.

*(And a special note to our Canadian friends: The Canadian Diabetes Association has a similar meal planning tool called Beyond the Basics. Beyond the Basics is compatible with both Eating Well with Canada’s Food Guide and the Exchange System. The information I’m sharing today can help you no matter which specific food plan you’re following.)*

The Exchange System got a little makeover in the summer of 2014, and the word “exchange” has actually been replaced with the word “choice.” You may use the words “exchange” and “choice” interchangeably. We’ll continue to refer to this plan as the Exchange System, however, since this is what our members have been familiar with for the past few decades. Another part of the makeover involved renaming the “meat and meat substitute” group the “protein” group.
All calories come from carbohydrates, protein or fat. Most foods contain a mixture of these three nutrients. In the Exchange System, foods are grouped together based on similar combinations of carbs, protein and fat.

Think about your closet for a minute. Most of the time, we hang our shirts together, slacks together and dresses or suits together. We put these things together because they are similar. That’s what the Exchange System does with food.

Let’s think of it another way. Picture 4 quarters and a one dollar bill.

The four quarters and the $1 dollar bill look different, but they are worth the same amount. ½ of an English muffin may look different from ½ cup of bran cereal or a slice of bread as you see here, but all 3 of these have similar combinations of carbs, protein and fat and are all considered a starch exchange or a starch choice.
Speaking of the starch group, this is the group we’re going to start with today when building our dinner plate.

The TOPS My Day One booklet includes mix and match starting menus, very similar to what you see here, that can help you build balanced meals for your calorie level.

As you can see, we have a number of starch options to choose from including peas, pasta, sweet potatoes or wild rice. Let’s go ahead and choose sweet potatoes. They’re tasty, a good source of vitamins and minerals and, as a bonus, are naturally gluten-free.

½ cup of plain sweet potato is roughly 1 to 1 ½ starch exchanges.
You’ll notice I mentioned ½ cup; Food Exchanges are in specific portions. Does this mean that you’ll need to carry measuring cups and spoons with you everywhere you go?

Not exactly. While it is helpful, especially in the beginning, to actually measure portions so you can get an accurate idea of how large each exchange is, the fact is, you won’t always have measuring cups or a scale handy when it’s time to eat. Comparing exchange sizes to familiar objects is one way to control your portions.

You can find a number of helpful portion visuals in chapter 2 of the TOPS lifestyle guide, Real Life: The Hands-on Pounds-off Guide.

We’ll go over helpful visuals like these as we build our plate.
As you see here, ½ cup of mashed sweet potato is about the same size as ½ of an apple.
So now we have sweet potatoes—which count as a starch exchange—on our plate, but they look so lonely. Let’s add some veggies.
Vegetables should be a part of any balanced meal plan and the Exchange System is no exception. In general, one vegetable exchange is 1 cup of raw vegetables or ½ cup cooked.

Go ahead and make a fist for a moment. One cup of raw vegetables is about the size of a small fist.

One nonstarchy vegetable exchange has only about 25 calories, making this group a smart choice when you’re trying to watch calories.
Again, you’ll notice the choices you see listed here look very similar to what you’ll find in the mix and match starting menus in *My Day One*.

Our vegetable options today include broccoli, cauliflower, green beans and mixed peppers. Let’s choose broccoli.
We’ve now added 1 cup of cooked broccoli. How many vegetable exchanges is this?

If you answered 2 vegetables exchanges you’re correct. Once again, ½ cup of cooked vegetables, like broccoli, is about 1 vegetable exchange. So 1 cup of cooked vegetables is going to be about 2 vegetable exchanges.

As you can see, our plate is slowly filling up; but this is not quite a balanced meal yet.
It’s time to add some protein. We can find this in the protein group. The foods in this group are high in protein but have varying levels of fat and calories. Proteins can come from animals or plants.

One ounce of an animal-based protein such as poultry, fish or cheese, counts as one protein exchange. Since it is uncommon to eat only one ounce of meat, you can see 3-ounce servings shown here. A 3-ounce serving of meat, like chicken, is about the size of a deck of cards.

A 3-ounce serving of fish is about the size of a checkbook. Keep these visuals in mind the next time you’re adding chicken or fish to your plate.

*(Note to presenter: You may want to bring a deck of cards and a checkbook and hold these items up as you’re mentioning them.)*
Today, we’ll add 3 ounces of grilled chicken to our plate. How many protein exchanges is this?

Well, since 1 ounce is 1 protein exchange, 3 ounces is about 3 exchanges.
If you don’t eat meat, or if you’re just trying to cut back on animal-based protein, the Exchange System can still be a helpful tool. Plant-based proteins include beans, lentils, soy burgers, tofu, peanut butter and hummus. You’ll find more plant-based proteins listed in the Real Life book.

Does anyone have suggestions for a plant-based protein we could exchange our 3 ounces of chicken for?

(Note to presenter: Wait for several responses. Feel free to add your own suggestions.)
Our plate is filling up nicely but could use a little more flavor. Let’s add a choice from the fat exchange group.

All 4 of the portions you see listed here count as one fat exchange. We have avocado, butter, mayonnaise and olive oil.

Which of these would be the best choice for our dinner plate? As a reminder, we currently have sweet potato, broccoli and chicken.

(Note to presenter: Allow audience to share responses.)
Let’s choose the olive oil. Sautéing the broccoli in 1 teaspoon of olive oil adds 1 fat exchange to our plate. Another idea would be to add 1 teaspoon of butter to the sweet potato. But, there are other ways to flavor potatoes without adding extra fat.
That’s where the free exchange group comes in handy. This group includes plain coffee and tea; sparkling water and sugar-free drink mixes; and small amounts of condiments, spices and seasonings. Free foods can spice up your meal plan, tide you over between meals, or satisfy a craving without blowing your calorie budget. Let’s add a dash of cinnamon to our sweet potato.
And there you have it! Here is our dinner plate including mashed sweet potato with a dash of cinnamon, broccoli sautéed in olive oil and grilled chicken. You may also choose to have 1 cup of skim milk for a milk exchange (as you see pictured here) or a glass of sparkling water with a lemon twist for a free exchange.

And if you don’t like one of the foods listed, you can exchange it for another food in the same exchange group. That’s the beauty of the exchange system!

For example, we can exchange the cup of cooked broccoli for a cup of cooked cauliflower. Or we can exchange the ½ cup of sweet potato for 1/3 cup of brown rice.

But, wait, something is missing...
Our dinner plate is set, but what about dessert? Fruit makes a sweet choice and, the best part is, you don’t have to worry about lots of added sugars, fats and preservatives that can be found in processed dessert foods like packaged cookies and cakes.

Here we have grape-sicles, which are grapes threaded on wooden skewers and frozen for 30 minutes. The grapes you see here on our plate count as one fruit exchange.

The meal we just put together, including dessert, is around 500 calories. One of the nice things about the Exchange System, is that if you’re counting exchanges, your calories are counted, too. And so are carbs, fat and protein. That’s because each exchange is assigned a general calorie value and that value is based on the amount of carbs, fat and protein. For example, one fruit exchange is about 60 calories. If you’d like to see the protein, carbohydrate, fat, and calorie breakdown of each exchange group, please check out page 38 of the TOPS lifestyle guide, *Real Life: The Hands-on Pounds-off Guide*.

Because the meals are balanced, they should keep you feeling full, but if you are still hungry, it’s hard to go wrong with fresh, nonstarchy vegetables. In fact, salad greens actually count as a free exchange (without dressing) so you can fill up without going off plan.
Bon appétit!
You can create your own plates, like the one we just covered, using the mix and match menus in *My Day One*. These menus can help you build balanced meals that suit your tastes whether you’re brand new to the Exchange System or if you’re just feeling stuck in a rut. There’s even a gluten-free and vegan version of these menus in the Healthy Eating and Recipes section of the Members Area on www.tops.org.

You can also find sample plates, just like the sample we discussed, for breakfast, lunch and dinner in Healthy Eating and Recipes. And there are simple, practical tips for using the Exchange System in nearly every issue of *TOPS News*.

We did not cover every detail of the Exchange System today, but you can learn more in chapter 2 of TOPS’ book *Real Life: The Hands-on Pounds-off Guide*. Remember, we don’t expect you to become Exchange System gurus overnight. Changing habits for good takes time and is best done in small, manageable steps—and the same goes for the Food Exchange System.

Starting or re-launching any nutrition plan can seem like a daunting task at first. But, with a little patience, persistence, help from TOPS tools and support from weekly TOPS meetings, you can make the Food Exchange System work for you.