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The Joy of Overeating

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I like to stop at the local bakery for coffee on my way into work. Usually I'll resist the display of baked goods, but I recall not too long ago falling victim to a monstrous muffin. By the time lunch hour rolled around, I had that familiar tummy ache you remember from childhood when you ate too many treats -- full but unsatisfied, accentuated by a dull ache.

My gastrointestinal disgruntlement shouldn't have come as a surprise, given that the muffin was half the size of my head.

There's no question that muffins, cookies and just about every other type of food you can order these days come super-sized, but new research indicates even the seemingly classic recipes we use at home are provoking us to eat big.

Researchers from Cornell University studied recipes in "The Joy of Cooking" -- one of this country's most published cookbooks and the cornerstone of many cooks' libraries. The research looked at 18 recipes that have been published in each edition of "The Joy of Cooking" dating back to 1936. They found that 14 of the 18 recipes had increases in calories over time, and the difference wasn't small.

The overall calories in the recipes increased by 35 percent -- from 1,922 to 2,489. The calories per serving also increased for 17 of the 18 recipes for an average of an extra 77 calories per serving.

Researchers say about 38 percent of the increase in calories comes from using more fattening ingredients and 62 percent of the increase comes from larger portion sizes.

This isn't the first time someone noticed the expanding portions.

Lisa Young, an adjunct professor in the Department of Nutrition, Food Studies and Public Health at New York University, has spent much of her career studying how the widening of portion sizes over the years has contributed to our widening waistlines.

In 2002, Young published a study in the American Journal of Public Health which found that identical recipes for cookies and desserts featured in newer editions of the "Joy of Cooking" specify fewer servings than editions from 20 years ago, meaning that portions are expected to be much, much larger.

“The identical brownie recipe in the 1997 edition of the “Joy of Cooking” yields 16 brownies, and the 1975 edition yielded 30 brownies -- hence, each brownie is almost twice as big,” Young explained.

And according to Young, the portion-size explosion doesn’t end with the cornerstone cookbook.

In her book “The Portion Teller Plan,” Young wrote that “in the course of just three years -- between 1984 and 1987 -- the chocolate chip cookie recipe on the back of the Nestlé’s Toll House Semi-Sweet Chocolate Morsels package scaled down the number of cookies it makes from 100 to 60.”

To put this in perspective, it's as if any time you stop at the bakery for a muffin, cookie or bagel, you will probably be handed a treat that is nearly twice the size it would have been only 15 years ago.

Dr. David Katz, associate professor of public health at Yale University, said that he was not surprised that cookbooks such as the “Joy of Cooking” have increased the portion sizes of popular recipes over the years.

“The average dinner plate has increased in diameter roughly 40 percent since World War II,” Katz explained. “It stands to reason that if plates are bigger, [portions] are bigger to fill them. I am certainly not surprised that overeating does not stop at the threshold to one's own home.”

Nowadays, many nutrition experts are careful not just to urge their patients to cook more at home, but to be aware of the portion size and calorie content of the recipes they are cooking as well.

“I tell [my patients] that healthy cooking needs to start at home and this involves ingredients, cooking methods and perhaps most important -- portion size,” said Keith-Thomas Ayoob, associate professor in the department of pediatrics at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx, New York. “I tell them to push the veggies way more than they do now. People balk at smaller, computer mouse-sized portions of meat but they forget that the plate doesn't have to be empty, just occupied with more whole grains and veggies.”

From now on, I think I’m going to bring half of my homemade muffin to work, and save the rest for later.

What do you think? Are portion sizes out of control? Do you pay attention to portion sizes for family meals?

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