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FOOD SLEUTH

Oversized portions are increasing nation's bulk

By MELINDA HEMMELGARN

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In what might turn out to be one of my most celebrated columns - Sept. 21's "Lard comes back in style for both health and taste" - a short paragraph at the end might have slipped your radar screen. It had to do with portion size. I explained that back in our nation's trimmer days, one serving of pie was just one-eighth of an 8- to 9-inch pie - a child's portion by today's standards.

Thirty years ago, we enjoyed slivers of pie and cake with 6-ounce cups of coffee. Fast-forward to the 21st century, and we've replaced miniature cups with megamugs, plates with platters and moderate portions with supersizes. And who can blame us? Larger portions often cost less - if we only consider our wallets and not our waist sizes.

Lisa Young, author of "Portion Teller: Smartsizes Your Way to Permanent Weight Loss" (Morgan Road Books, 2005) spoke at the Society for Nutrition Education meeting in Orlando, Fla., this summer. She described the insidious, creeping portion sizes that have contributed to our nation's obesity epidemic. Most of us hardly noticed the change.

Young, however, was paying close attention. She said she believed that growing portion sizes contributed significantly to her patients' dieting failures. So one summer, she set out to investigate her theory. She bicycled around New York City with a food scale, camera and notebook, weighing, measuring and recording portion sizes of foods sold in restaurants, quick shops and delis. Then she researched the portions of similar foods served decades ago and compared today's serving sizes with Department of Agriculture standards.

Young discovered that with the single exception of sliced white bread, all commonly available food portions greatly exceeded USDA standards. Most serving sizes had ballooned to between two and five times their sizes when the food products were first introduced in the marketplace. For example, muffins and bagels exceeded USDA standards by 480 percent. The 64-ounce 7-Eleven Double Gulp soft drink contains 800 calories. The drink is 20 times the size of a bottle of Coca-Cola when it was first introduced at the turn of the last century. Young found that between 1970 and 2000, most ready-to-eat foods - from chocolate bars to hamburgers and pizza - increased in size and calories.

Why the portion surge? For one, production: The U.S. food supply provides about 500 more calories per person per day compared with the

1970s. Second, food is relatively cheap compared with overhead and labor costs, and the food industry knows that "value marketing" sells. For example, Young explains that popular restaurant guides frequently highlight and praise establishments that offer "all-you-can-eat" deals, free refills and two-for-one specials. It's human nature to want to get the most for our money. But Young also observed that identical recipes for cookies and desserts in old and new editions of classic cookbooks yield fewer servings today. The same recipe that used to serve six now serves four. We simply have grown - pun intended - to expect larger portions.

Unfortunately, Penn State child development researcher Leanne Birch says, starting at about age 3, the more food that is served to us, the more we eat. Big portions seem to override our natural satiety cues, and most of us don't compensate for eating too much at one sitting by eating less at the next.

Young says weight control depends on our ability to eat with "portion-size awareness." In "Portion Teller" she gives readers skills to "smartsized," rather than "supersize."

Here are a dozen tips you can start using today:

- Let children portion food for themselves while helping them recognize feelings of hunger and satiety.
- Buy smaller package sizes. The larger the package, the more we'll eat.
- Get into the habit of choosing "small" options when eating out. Share your meal, or order half a portion or an appetizer as a main meal.
- Avoid large soft drinks.
- Use half the amount of sour cream, butter or cream cheese you normally would use on baked potatoes, bread or bagels.
- Bring food and water with you when traveling so you won't have to rely on vending or fast food.
- Check food package labels. Take the standard serving out of the package and eat it off a plate instead of straight out of a large box, bag or container.
- Avoid eating in front of the TV or while busy with other activities. Eat slowly, and eat "mindfully." In other words, pay attention to eating and fully enjoy the taste of your food.
- When cooking in large batches, freeze leftovers in single-meal-sized containers.
- Try to eat smaller but regularly planned meals and snacks. Skipping meals often leads us to eat larger portions of higher-calorie foods later in

the day.

- Take seconds of vegetables or salads instead of higher-calorie parts of a meal, such as meat or dessert.
- Make less food look like more. Eat off smaller plates and out of smaller bowls.

Eating less takes practice. Next week, I'll show you how to put portions in perspective.

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