



Eyes on the size

Food servings have ballooned since the 1970s. But you can enjoy less in a supersize world. **By Maureen Callahan**

is better, it's getting difficult to downsize when it comes to food. Theaters stuff popcorn into pails as big as washtubs. Restaurants dish up platters large enough for a family and call them single servings. And one brand of that old '60s standby, the TV dinner, now comes in three sizes: regular, Hungry Man, and the aptly named behemoth, Hungry Man XXL.

Dishing up smaller food portions—or the less-is-more approach to eating—may be better for health and weight control. But in today's marketplace, the advertising mantra is "more for less." And more sells, whether the product is a package of cookies, a bottle of soda, or a restaurant meal. So how can you overcome that message? First, recognize the tricks of a food trade that encourage you to buy and consume more, then learn what constitutes a proper portion.

Marketing of Big

When your favorite brand of crackers or soup goes on sale and the sign above the shelf reads "Limit 6," do you think about stocking up? Most people do consider it, says Brian Wansink, Ph.D., director of the Food and Brand Lab at the University of

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Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In studies he's conducted, people buy twice as much when items carry a numerical "limit" sign than when there is no limit. In fact, just posting signs that suggest something to the shopper, such as "Candy bars: Buy more for the weekend," prods many people to buy.

Americans are susceptible to such simple messages, Wansink says, because food purchases often rely on impulse. "You might spend a lot of time planning to pick up your kids after soccer practice," he says. "But food decisions are often made on the spot." Wansink's studies also show that the larger the container people buy, the more they consume, be it soda, candy, or potato chips. That is, when more food is put in front of us, we help ourselves to more of it. So food companies and restaurants have learned to employ simple strategies that quickly and subtly influence buying and eating decisions.

One common strategy is to make servings larger—think double-stuffed cookies or combination restaurant meals. Not only does bigger packaging attract most consumers, but we've also been reconditioned to expect that as the size of something goes up, the cost usually goes down, says Wansink. He points to fast-food chains, which started jockeying for consumer dollars in the 1970s and early '80s. Competition was fierce, and cutting costs wasn't an option. But increasing the size of burgers, fries, and sodas—giving consumers more food for their money—made sense because food costs make up a relatively small part of the expense of doing business.

Today, at a Denver-area McDonald's, customers can inflate

the sides (soda and fries) that go with a combination meal from small to large for only 40 cents. The cost to McDonald's, however, is just pennies; frozen fries' wholesale cost is about 30 cents per pound, and sodas cost even less. Lest the customer overlook the bargain, the staff in these establishments is trained to point out the value, says NYU's Young. "But you don't need a double cheeseburger, even though it only costs a few cents more," she contends. It may sound like a good deal when it comes to cost, she says, but it's really not—especially to your waistline.

Bigger Food, Bigger Bellies

Several recent reports illustrate the link between ballooning portions and expanding waistlines. In the first, Young carefully documents the dramatic rise in marketplace food portions, a trend that started in the 1970s then took off in the '80s. For example, a Butterfinger candy bar at just over two ounces was the only choice in the '60s and early '70s. By the '80s, it was joined by a five-ounce "Beast" bar. McDonald's dished up only a two-ounce package of fries in its early days. By the '80s, the menu had grown to three choices: small, medium, and large (six ounces). Today's supersize fries weigh in at seven ounces.

Running parallel to these expanding portions, Young documents a similar rise in the number of overweight and obese Americans. Could the two trends be connected? Possibly, though obesity is a complex disease; sedentary lifestyles, genetics, and many other factors contribute to its development. Still,

Six Simple Ways to Eat Less

- Start your meal with a lightly dressed salad. It will count toward the recommended five fruits and vegetables a day, and it will help fill you up, leaving less room for heavy entrées.
- Downgrade your restaurant orders. Order an appetizer as your entrée; split an entrée with a friend; or set aside the extra entrée portion and have it bagged up for lunch tomorrow. "If people want to supersize to get the best bargain, buy it and share it," says Lisa Young, Ph.D., R.D., New York University professor of nutrition.
- Choose quality over quantity. A piece of rich gourmet chocolate or cup of good coffee will be infinitely more satisfying than more of the cheap stuff.
- At home, cook smaller quantities of food. If you have less food prepared, you'll be less tempted to finish off the casserole.
- Use a kitchen scale to determine the weight of a chicken breast or salmon fillet serving. "You don't need to weigh food every time you eat it," Young says. "But weigh it a few times to see where you stand." The same principle applies to measuring cups; use them to parcel out servings of grains and cereals.
- Serve food on smaller plates. Your plate will look fuller, even though there's less food on it.

Young speculates there is a link between large servings and wider waistlines. "When I saw a report that Americans gained an average of eight pounds in the 1980s, I remembered how portions grew so much in that decade, and it just clicked," she says. "It was clear to me that there was a connection between the two."

Considering most Americans now spend 47 percent of their food dollars away from home, our growing acceptance of larger portions could be taking a bigger toll than most people realize. If you have any doubt about how expanding portions size up healthwise, a report called "From Wallet to Waistline: The Hidden Costs of Supersizing" spells it out. Issued last summer by the National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity (NANA), an independent lobbying group, it details the costs—to the wallet and to health—of upsizing to larger portions. For just a handful of change, you can dig into twice as much food and nearly twice as many calories. Never mind that a Wendy's Classic Double with Cheese already carries a hefty 760-calorie price tag and a whopping 19 grams of saturated fat. For just \$1.57 more you can make it into a "Combo Meal," adding fries and a soda that raise the calories to 1,360 and bump the saturated fat up another 7 grams. Or how about upgrading from 7-Eleven's Gulp to the Double Gulp? For an extra 37 cents more you get triple the calories.

And all those calories add up fast. According to the NANA report, Americans' daily caloric intake has risen by 167 calories since 1978. Theoretically, a 167-calorie-per-day increase could add 17 pounds of fat to the body every year if there's no change in physical activity levels. Young, who also works as a nutrition counselor, says that her clients look stunned when she tells them that a bigger portion has more calories. "It seems like common sense, but they don't know it," she says. That's probably because, after years of seeing bigger portions, we've come to expect them—a conclusion borne out by a study from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which found that the portion size of hamburgers consumed in the home has risen by 1.3 ounces and 97 calories.

Wansink suggests people have an internal "consumption norm" that is easily adjusted. "Let's say that two spoonfuls of mashed potatoes is the normal portion," Wansink says. "If over the next three years, you're consistently served four spoonfuls of mashed potatoes, that becomes your norm. You lose sight of the old portion size."

French Moderation, American Excess

Interestingly, the same supersize marketing tactics that entice American consumers to buy large don't play well in other parts of the world. In countries like France, "less is more" seems to be the rule when it comes to food. In McDonald's French outlets, portions of fries, soft drinks, and many other menu items are typically far smaller than in the States. Supersize is not even in the French culinary or linguistic vocabulary.

This size discrepancy illustrates the role culture plays in determining how much we eat, says Paul Rozin, Ph.D., a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania. Rozin, who's surveyed eating attitudes of people in Japan, France, Belgium, and the United States,

finds that while many French foods are high in fat, the French eat fewer calories than Americans because French portion sizes are smaller. At French sweet shops, for example, a single scoop of sorbet or ice cream is a small, golf ball-sized sphere. Stateside, our single-dip cone holds a mound about the size of a tennis ball.

The French approach to meals is also revealing. In France, food is prized as one of life's pleasures, something that is to be lingered over and enjoyed in moderation, Rozin says. Here, we tend to view food with a mixture of pleasure and concern. Our sense of pleasure often is tied up with value and quantity, but we worry about the health implications of too much fat. In addition, Rozin contends that a determining factor in how much we eat in this country is based on what he calls "culture and situation." Put simply, Americans learn from an early age to eat at "certain times and in certain contexts," he says.

Culture even dictates the meal. Take lunch, for example. In the United States, it's typically a

sandwich, some kind of beverage, and maybe a bag of chips followed by dessert. Rozin says we eat this meal in the early afternoon and often gobble down the dessert even if we aren't hungry. That's because many of us just expect meals to end with dessert. In other words, when served the typical meal at the expected time, we follow the expected behavior: We eat. Hunger doesn't necessarily enter into the equation; our appetites are ruled by the clock, family tradition, or a sense of polite obligation, and not necessarily by our stomachs. When this learned cultural and situational behavior is coupled with the enormous portions many eating establishments now serve, the American clean-your-plate mentality and penchant for value often override physiological hunger cues and can spell trouble.



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Serving Sign Language

One of the best tools for gauging a proper serving size is your hand. Although it's not 100 percent perfect, it should provide a reliable rough estimate. The best part? It's customized to fit your needs. For instance, if you're a petite woman who requires fewer calories, your hand is probably smaller than that of a tall man who requires more. Follow this guide:



A closed fist

=

Cup of vegetables
or piece of fruit



Two fingers

=

Ounce of
cheese



A cupped hand

=

Cup of dry cereal



An open palm

=

Single serving
of meat



Tip of thumb

=

Teaspoon of
butter



But it doesn't have to play out this way. "I think most of the time, if people were given 20 percent less food to eat, they'd hardly notice," Rozin says. "The French are happy with smaller servings. Americans probably would be, too, if we just let ourselves."

Enough Is Enough

First, we have to readjust our concept of what constitutes a small, medium, and large serving. The guidelines listed in the government's Food Guide Pyramid (which you can find at www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/Fpyr/pyramid.html) offer a starting point for what types and amounts of food most people need, says Kathleen Cappellano, R.D., nutrition information manager at the USDA Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging at Tufts University in Boston. Foods are broken into groups, and a range of servings is listed for each group. The higher end of the range is meant for people with higher caloric needs. For example, petite, sedentary women and most older adults need only about 1,600 calories a day. That amounts to two servings of the lean meat/fish/poultry group, six of grains, a small amount of fat and sugar, and plenty of fruits and vegetables. An active teenager who plays football and jogs regularly requires about 2,800 calories a day and requires three servings of lean meat and 11 servings of grains.

Anyone can estimate the correct portions based on real-world visual references, Cappellano says. Jennifer Nelson, director of clinical dietetics at the Mayo Clinic, in Rochester, Minnesota, agrees. Take the tip of your thumb, for example. That's about equal to the size of one serving of fat—and fats, as you probably already know, should be used sparingly in a healthy diet. So when you're spreading butter on your toast in the morning, use your thumb as a reference to keep the amount realistic. The palm of your hand is a perfect tool to estimate about three ounces of meat—or what amounts to a realistic serving. "Just set your hand next to your plate and compare the meat serving to your palm," Nelson says. "If it's bigger than your palm and thicker than your little finger, it's too big for a single serving."

But isn't that a pretty skimpy portion when steakhouses dish up "petit" filets that are a full eight ounces? Not really. "People tend to focus on the meat and think they'll starve with a portion the size of their palm. But they're forgetting all the other food groups, like fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, that fill up a plate," Nelson says. "If you're eating from all the food groups, you'll have plenty."

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