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HEADLINE: Can we downsize?

Americans have long asked for small portions; now they're here.

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BODY:

Back in the 1970s, hamburgers were thin, soda bottles were small enough to drain in a few swigs and a candy bar was a bar and not a brick. These days, a bakery muffin can weigh in at half a pound, a plate of pasta can deliver a day's worth of calories and a chocolate-chip cookie can be bigger than your hand.

America's taste for big portions has led us down a dangerous path. Two-thirds of us are overweight or obese. So many Americans are getting so fat that obesity is beginning to compete with smoking as the leading contributor to death in the U.S.

Everything is bigger -- sandwiches, tubs of movie popcorn, fast-food cheeseburgers, even Oreos, which are available with twice as much stuffing as they had a generation ago. "We are now surrounded by huge food," says Barbara J. Rolls, a nutrition researcher at Penn State. That may be changing. Several food manufacturers and restaurants are beginning to offer smaller portions for consumers who want alternatives to huge food. "The industry is responding to what consumers want," says Katharine Kim, spokeswoman for the National Restaurant Assn. "They respond quickly to customer demand."

Earlier this month, McDonald's, which has long been criticized by dietitians for pushing oversized hamburgers, fries and sodas, announced that it was phasing out its Super Size fries (7.1 ounces) and drink (42 ounces). McDonald's said the phase-out was an effort to simplify its menu and offer a balance of choices for customers.

The announcement pleased dietitians, although many also contend that portions at the fast-food chain are still too big. "The largest size of fries will now be over 6 ounces, which is still huge," says Lisa Young, a registered dietitian and adjunct assistant professor of nutrition at New York University.

Other companies are keeping their larger sizes but are offering new Smaller ones as well. For example, the Coca-Cola Co. and Pepsi-Cola Co. now sell cola, diet cola and other carbonated beverages in approximately 8-ounce cans. (The smaller cans of Pepsi are available nationally, although some smaller stores don't carry them. Coke's mini cans are available in about half of the U.S. market. Expansion plans will depend on consumer demand.) Although Pepsi won't divulge sales figures, company spokesman Dave DeCecco says the company has been "very pleased" with consumer response to the smaller cans.

In three to six months, Kraft Foods Inc., the nation's largest food manufacturer, will roll out 100-calorie single-serve packages of such snack foods as Oreos, Chips Ahoy, Cheese Nips and Wheat Thins. The snacks, which will be labeled "Nabisco 100 calorie

packs," will each have 100 calories, 3 grams or fewer of fat, no trans fat and no cholesterol. The Oreos, Chips Ahoy and Cheese Nips will be reformulated to meet these nutritional guidelines; for example, the Oreos will have no creme filling. The company is calling them "thin-crisp versions" of the original product, says Kraft spokeswoman Donna Sitkiewicz. And Good Humor-Breyers Ice Cream has started selling mini ice cream pops, Popsicles, Fudgsicles, Klondike bars and ice cream sandwiches. "They're designed for those with smaller appetites or anyone looking for just a couple of bites," says Lisa Piasecki, a Good Humor-Breyers spokeswoman.

The new offerings come on the heels of lawsuits alleging that some food products are unhealthful or have contributed to weight gain. Both Kraft Foods and McDonald's have been the target of legal actions. Kraft subsequently agreed to alter its Oreos to remove trans-fatty acids. A widely publicized suit against McDonald's was dismissed, but the company nonetheless announced that it would begin offering leaner McNuggets. The new, smaller-portioned products could help blunt criticism that food manufacturers are encouraging their customers to gorge themselves to the detriment of their health.

Regardless of the motivation behind the new offerings, if smaller servings sell well, more food manufacturers are expected to jump on the reduced-portion-size bandwagon. "I expect that we will see more of these types of products that provide consumers with an additional tool to manage their caloric intake," says Stephanie K. Childs, spokeswoman for the Grocery Manufacturers of America, which represents the food, beverage and consumer products industry.

Food will be getting smaller in local sports stadiums too. Levy Restaurants, which provides food for concession stands at Staples Center, the Arena in Oakland, Dodger Stadium and Hollywood Park, is introducing a selection of smaller-sized food items in concession stands, private clubs and luxury suites. These "bitty bites" will include silver-dollar-sized Ahi tuna burgers, mini Chicago-style hot dogs and mini dessert plates.

"Big portions are out, but mini foods with big flavors are in," says John McLean, Levy's chef de cuisine. The company expects the mini portions to "catch on in a huge way," says McLean. Levy Restaurants had offered mini portions of a variety of foods in sports stadium luxury suites and found that people loved them. So the company decided to take small portions beyond the suites and sell them throughout the stadium. Smaller portions are showing up on menus in restaurants and fast-food places too. Quiznos Sub has introduced the Diamond Mini Meltz, a 4.5-ounce sandwich that is much smaller than the chain's average sub, which weighs about 16 ounces. "In an age when super-sizing has become common in fast food, Quiznos recognized that these large meals aren't for everyone," says Stacie Lange, spokeswoman for Quiznos.

Increasingly, restaurants are offering lunch-size portions, half-portions, tapas and tasting menus, and they are becoming more open to patrons splitting entrees or ordering several appetizers instead of an entree. Many even offer to pack half of a meal in a to-go carton while the diner eats the other half, Kim says. "They are tapping in to what's happening and trying to accommodate customers with their dietary plans," Kim says. "Consumers drive what's on the menu."

Will smaller sizes make a difference? There is some evidence to suggest they might, particularly when it comes to snack foods. Rolls, who has conducted extensive research into portion size, has found that the amount of food in a package can influence how much a person eats. In a study published last month in the journal *Appetite*, Rolls gave people snack bags of potato chips ranging in size from 1 ounce to 6 ounces for an afternoon snack and told them to eat what they wanted. As it turned out, the larger the bag, the more the people ate. For example, when they were given the 6-ounce bag of chips, women ate 18% more chips and men ate 37% more than they ate when given the 3-ounce bag. Even more interesting is that when the study participants ate dinner a few hours later, they didn't adjust their meal intakes to compensate for the sizes of their snacks. They ate just as much after big afternoon snacks as they did after small snacks.

It's hard to believe, though, that smaller bags of potato chips and smaller cans of Pepsi are the solution to America's obesity crisis. Just because these smaller portions are available doesn't mean people will eat less. A Klondike bar is pretty tasty, and it's not easy to eat a mini one without wanting to go back to the freezer for two or three more. As the obesity epidemic shows, we Americans have shown that willpower isn't our strong point.

Another consideration is price. Twenty 1-ounce bags of chips cost far more than one 20-ounce bag. "People have the perception that the companies are trying to cheat them," Rolls says. When a 2-liter (about 68 ounces) bottle of soda costs 99 cents and a six-pack of 8-ounce (48 ounces) cans costs \$2.50, it's hard to argue with that, though small single servings require a lot more packaging than large ones. Rolls also wonders whether smaller sizes will make their way out of Grocery stores and into convenience stores and vending machines, where snacks are frequently purchased. When a snack craving hits and there is nothing around but a vending machine, we are at its mercy. "If there's a 1-ounce bag you're going to take it, and if there's a 2-ounce bag you're going to take it," Rolls says.

Dietitians don't know whether smaller-size packages will help reverse the trend toward bigger and bigger portions. What they do know, however, is that portion sizes began to grow in the 1970s, rose sharply in the 1980s and have continued to increase in parallel with expanding body weights, according to Young.

"I am a bit skeptical for various reasons," says Young, who has published studies on portion sizes in the U.S. She wonders whether food manufacturers and restaurants are introducing smaller sizes just to appease their critics. "I don't think the corporate conscience is changing at all," Young says. Rather, companies are under huge pressure to do something -- or at least to appear to do something -- to help solve America's weight problem. But the fact is, Young says, "in order for a food company to make money, they have to sell more food."

Like Rolls, Young wonders if consumers will pay more per ounce for smaller sizes and whether small portions will be available anywhere but grocery stores. She'd like to see small bottles of soda and bags of chips shoulder to shoulder with big bags and bottles in convenience stores and vending machines.

"What I would really like is to see them get rid of those obscenely large sizes," Young says. "You don't need a 20-ounce Coke bottle."