

Newsday March 2004

NUTRITION: Redefining your 'portion'

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March 16, 2004

Muffins that weigh half a pound. Cookies the size of salad plates. Quart-size cups of cola. "Medium" bags of movie popcorn that contain 16 cups.

Portion sizes aren't just big, they're gargantuan. As a result, Americans are bigger, too.

"Portions of foods that people assume are meant for one person can easily feed two or more - not only restaurant entrees, but many other foods like bagels, chips, cookies, muffins and drinks," said ***Lisa Young***, a dietitian in private practice in Manhattan and co-author of several studies looking at how growing portion sizes have contributed to America's obesity epidemic.

Young's research, conducted with Marion Nestle from New York University, shows that dinner plates in restaurants have grown 25 percent, bakers use bigger tins to bake muffins, and fast-food restaurants use larger containers for soda and fries. Their comparison of identical cookie recipes in "The Joy of Cooking" found that the 1997 edition recipe yields fewer servings than the 1975 version, meaning bigger portion sizes. For example, a 1975 brownie recipe yields 30, while the more recent version yields 16.

The "huge food" problem

In a separate study, when ***Young and Nestle*** compared commonly available food portions today to standard serving sizes according to the Department of Agriculture and Food and Drug Administration, the results were alarming. On average, cookies were 700 percent larger, cooked pasta entrees were 480 percent larger, muffins were 333 percent larger, steaks were 224 percent larger and bagels were 195 percent larger than the recommended standard-size serving.

"The bottom line is that bigger portions mean more calories," said Cindy Moore, a dietitian in Cleveland and spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association. "Even an increase of just 100 extra calories a day, when compounded over the course of a year, can result in a 14-pound weight gain if not balanced out by exercise."

Added to that is research by Barbara Rolls and colleagues at Penn State University showing that when people are served bigger portions, they eat more - and don't compensate for those extra calories consumed by eating less later in the day.

Managing portion sizes

Many researchers believe that America's weight epidemic may be due more to how much we eat, than what we eat. With that in mind, here are some experts' tips on how to defy our supersize culture.

Eurosize it. That's the suggestion of Rachel Johnson, dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at the University of Vermont. She points to a study from the University of Pennsylvania showing that U.S. restaurant servings are 25 percent larger than those in France.

"In Europe, people take the time to enjoy wonderful tastes of food, but in smaller amounts. We need to start thinking of food in terms of quality, not quantity," she said.

Get real. Become aware of how much you are really eating, said Melanie Polk, director of nutrition education for the American Institute of Cancer Research in Washington, D.C. According to a 2000 survey by her organization, most Americans are unaware that portions they eat have increased in size. Sixty-two percent of respondents said the portions served in restaurants are the same size or smaller compared to 10 years ago, and eight in 10 said the portions they eat at home are the same or smaller.

Polk recommends taking two plates; on one, measure the typical amount of food you serve. On the other, measure out the recommended amounts, such as 3 ounces of meat or 2 cups of rice. The results can help you better recognize appropriate amounts versus amounts you are simply used to eating.

Cut back. Moore tells her clients to make small, lasting changes. "Pick one or two foods at each meal - or even at just one meal a day - and cut back the amount by one-half to one-third."

Portions vs. servings

A serving is the amount of food you see listed on the Nutrition Facts panel on packaged foods or what is recommended for different food groups on the Food Guide Pyramid. A portion is the amount you choose to put on your plate and that may be several servings.

SEE WHATS IN A SERVING

Using a visual cue for what constitutes a serving size according to the Food Guide Pyramid helps you stay on track whether eating out or at home.

GRAINS

Servings per day: 6-11

Portion: 1/2 cup of rice

Visual cue: half of a baseball

Portion: 1/2 bagel

Visual cue: the diameter of a
large to-go coffee lid

MEAT

Servings per day: 2-3
(5-7 ounces total)

Portion: 3 ounces

Visual cue: a deck of cards or a cassette that's small enough to fit in a woman's hand

VEGETABLES

Servings per day: 3-5

Portion: 1/2 cup chopped

veggies (a rounded handful)

Visual cue: Half of a baseball

FRUIT

Servings per day: 2-4

Portion: 1 medium piece

Visual cue: The size of a
baseball

DAIRY

Servings per day: 2-3

Portion: 1 1/2 ounces or

1 slice or 4 dices of

cheese

Visual cue: A tube of lipstick or a floppy computer disk

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