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Portion distortion

Americans often penny-wise but pound-foolish when it comes to choosing sensible size servings of food

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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've become 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," says Lisa Young, a dietitian in private practice in New York City and co-author of several studies examining how expanding portion sizes have contributed to America's obesity epidemic.

"Portions are about two to five times larger than they were in the 1970s," she says.

Several studies demonstrate the significant increase in the amounts of foods we choose--and consume--now compared to years past:

- Research by Samara Nielsen and Barry Popkin from the University of North Carolina found between 1977 and 1996, portion sizes increased for salty snacks, desserts, soft drinks, fruit drinks, French fries, hamburgers, cheeseburgers and Mexican food. The increases were large, adding more than 100 calories to a single serving in some cases.

- 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 pop and fries than in years past. 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 portion sizes are bigger. For example, for a brownie recipe, the 1975 version yields 30, while the more recent version yields 16.

- In a separate study, when Young and Nestle compared the differences between commonly available food portions today to standard serving sizes according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. 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 problem with 'huge food'

"The bottom line is that bigger portions mean more calories," says Cindy Moore, a dietitian in Cleveland and spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association. That usually translates into weight gain. "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."

"Larger portion sizes have become typical, so it is difficult for consumers to recognize appropriate amounts of food," says Young. Added to that is evidence from 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. This trend held whether the food was eaten at home or at a restaurant.

Perhaps nowhere is the increased size of foods more evident than at fast-food restaurants. Supersizing burgers, fries and drinks may cost just pennies extra from your pocket, but much more in terms of your waistline. For example, turning a Wendy's Classic Double with Cheese into an Old Fashioned Meal Combo Meal, which includes fries and a drink, costs an additional \$1.57--and 600 calories.

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 tips from the experts on how to defy our supersize culture.

- Eurosize it, suggests Rachel Johnson, dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at the University of Vermont. She points to a study by Paul Rozin and students from the University of Pennsylvania showing that restaurant servings in the U.S. 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," Johnson says.

- Get real. Become aware of how much you are really eating, says 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.

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

- Cut back. Moore advises her clients to focus on making small, lasting changes. "I tell people to pick one or two foods at each meal--or even at just one meal a day--and cut back on the amount by one-half to one-third." Some people find this easier to do than weighing or measuring foods, she says. Use the same concept when eating out. "The amount of food you get eating out is larger than what you would serve at home. Before you even take

the first bite, ask for a doggie bag and put half of it away immediately. That eliminates your temptation to nibble mindlessly once you've had your fill," she says.

Portions vs. servings: What's the difference?

"Talking about portion sizes and serving sizes is very confusing," admits Johnson. But there is an important distinction.

"A serving is the amount of food you see listed on the Nutrition Facts panel on packaged foods or what is recommended for the different food groups on the Food Guide Pyramid," she explains.

"A portion is the amount of food you choose to put on your plate. Portions may actually contain several servings."

The government uses standardized amounts for a serving of food as a way to educate people about eating a healthful diet. But in reality, most people are not eating amounts that are in sync with the recommended serving sizes. Johnson points to the recommendation from the grain group of the Food Guide Pyramid as an example of why this is confusing.

"People see the recommendation to eat 6 to 11 servings of bread or pasta or rice. A serving is just 1 slice of bread or 1/2 cup of rice or pasta," Johnson says. "But people incorrectly think they should be eating 6 portions (with a portion meaning a full bowl of pasta) and that may end up being triple what they should be eating in a day."

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What's a serving?

Having a visual cue for what constitutes a serving size according to the Food Guide Pyramid can help you stay on track whether eating out or at home. It's OK to eat more than the recommended serving size of a food at one meal (such as pasta for dinner--a more realistic amount is about 2 cups, or 4 servings) so long as you keep your total number of servings within the recommended number of servings per day.

FOOD: Pasta or rice

FOOD GROUP/SERVINGS A DAY: Grains/6-11 servings

SERVING SIZE: 1/2 cup

VISUAL CUE: Rounded handful or half of a baseball/tennis ball

FOOD: Bagel

FOOD GROUP/SERVINGS A DAY: Grains/6-11 servings

SERVING SIZE: 1/2 bagel

VISUAL CUE: Diameter of large to-go coffee lid

FOOD: Meat

FOOD GROUP/SERVINGS A DAY: Meat/2-3 servings (total of 5-7)

SERVING SIZE: 3 oz.

VISUAL CUE: Amount that fits in palm of a women's hand; deck of cards; cassette tape

FOOD: Vegetable

FOOD GROUP/SERVINGS A DAY: Fruits and vegetables/3-5 servings

SERVING SIZE: 1/2 cup chopped

VISUAL CUE: Rounded handful; half of a baseball

FOOD: Fruit

FOOD GROUP/SERVINGS A DAY: Fruits and vegetables/2-4 servings

SERVING SIZE: 1 medium piece

VISUAL CUE: Size of a baseball

FOOD: Cooked beans or legumes

FOOD GROUP/SERVINGS A DAY: Meat/2-3 servings (total of 5-7 oz.)

SERVING SIZE: 1/2 cup

VISUAL CUE: Rounded handful; half of a baseball

FOOD: Nuts

FOOD GROUP/SERVINGS A DAY: Meat/2-3 servings (total of 5-7 oz.)

SERVING SIZE: 1/3 cup or about 1 oz.

VISUAL CUE: Level handful

FOOD: Cheese

FOOD GROUP/SERVINGS A DAY: Dairy/2-3 servings

SERVING SIZE: 1 1/2 oz. or 1 slice

VISUAL CUE: 4 dice; tube of lipstick; size of a floppy computer disk

FOOD: Peanut butter

FOOD GROUP/SERVINGS A DAY: Meat/2-3 servings

SERVING SIZE: 2 tablespoons (total of 5-7 oz.)

VISUAL CUE: Golf ball