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Study confirms that US portion sizes ballooning  
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By Alison McCook

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - The evidence is piling up and helping to confirm what people have long suspected is true--that food portions in the US are growing ever larger.

While a recently published study found that portion sizes in the home and restaurants have jumped since the late 1970s, a new study shows that most products are now larger than when they first hit the US market.

For example, any bottle or can of Coca Cola is now larger than it was when the product first appeared in 1916. A regular sized fountain soda served at Burger King in 1954 is now equivalent to a child-sized drink in today's stores, while the original McDonald's regular sized soda is now five ounces smaller than the current child's portion.

The American desire for a better deal has played a role in the increase in portion sizes over time--but these short-term savings have likely led to long-term costs in health, according to Dr. Lisa R. Young and her colleague at New York University.

They found that the sizes of pre-packaged, ready-to-eat foods have increased substantially since the foods first appeared on the market.

While more food for less money gives us more bang for our buck, unhealthy portion sizes can cause people to lose perspective on what amount of food is healthy to eat, the authors note, thereby contributing to the growing epidemic of obesity.

Young and Dr. Marion Nestle obtained their findings by comparing current sizes of ready-to-eat foods offered at take-out and sit-down restaurants and fast food outlets to portion sizes of the same products when they first appeared on the market.

The study included past and present portion sizes for common foods such as pizza slices, hamburgers, soda, french fries, and pasta.

Reporting in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association, Young and Nestle discovered a steady increase in portion sizes over time.

In terms of solid foods, the hamburgers sold at Burger King in 1954 were more than two ounces smaller than today's Whopper Junior. In both McDonald's and Burger King, regular-sized fries sold in the restaurants' early days are currently more than four ounces smaller than the largest sizes sold in 2002.

In an interview, Young explained that manufacturers have likely increased the amount of food they offer over time because too much food is produced in the US already. Adding some of that excess to each

portion allows manufacturers to charge a little more for the product, she noted.

And for consumers, it's all about the deal, she said, so spending 25 cents more for twice the amount of popcorn at a movie theater is often appealing.

"It's an unfortunate win-win situation," Young said.

While that double-sized popcorn may be a bargain, "it's not a calorie bargain, and consumers don't really know that," Young noted.

In order to combat the effect of growing portion sizes on the nation's growing waistbands, Young suggested that experts work with the food industry to make some changes to how they sell food.

For instance, she recommended including nutritional labels on all ready-to-eat foods, informing customers of what they are eating.

Young added that people who are watching their weight should also try to occasionally shift their focus from what kinds of foods they eat--such as cutting back on carbohydrates or high fat foods--to how much of it they eat.

"It's really about size. It's all about the quantity," Young noted.

A study published in January in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that between 1977 and 1998 nearly all food portions increased both at home and in restaurants.

The serving size of an average soft drink, for instance, increased in that time from 13 ounces and 144 calories to nearly 20 fluid ounces and 193 calories. The average cheeseburger grew from 5.8 ounces to 7.3 ounces, swelling from 397 to 533 calories.

And salty snacks grew from 1 ounce to 1.6 ounces, climbing from 132 calories to 225 calories.

**SOURCE: Journal of the American Dietetic Association 2003;103:231-234.**

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Alison McCook  
Medical Journalist  
Reuters Health Information  
New York, NY USA