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HEADLINE: America - land of supersize appetites;
Restaurants, shops and even cookbooks have promoted larger servings
over the years, a trend paralleled by rising obesity

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BODY:

PALO ALTO - A new study has documented the supersizing of American appetites, with shops and restaurants increasing food portions dramatically in the past decade.

The findings, reported in the latest American Journal of Public Health, put the blame on the supersize culture for the growing problem of obesity in the country.

The researchers compared food portions sold in shops and restaurants over the decades and found that they have grown significantly.

The trend is most evident in fast food items, with french fries, hamburgers, and soda two to five times bigger now than when they were first introduced.

The expanding sizes also mean that people who follow government dietary guidelines may be biting off more than they should chew.

The United States Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration use certain standard portion sizes for their dietary information and food labels, but the actual sizes have outgrown these standard portions.

A store-bought chocolate cookie, for example, was found to be eight times heavier than the standard portion. Cooked pasta, muffins, steaks, and bagels exceed the standards by 480, 333, 224, and 195 per cent respectively, according to the study.

Restaurants are using larger dinner plates, bakers are selling larger muffin tins, pizzerias are using larger pans, and fast-food companies are using larger drink and french fry containers, said the study's authors, New York University researchers Lisa Young and Marion Nestle.

They suggest that one reason for the trend is increased competition among companies.

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Introducing larger items is one way to retain or expand market share. From a marketing standpoint, oversized packages draw attention to a new product, as research has shown for beer, soft drinks, and fast food, their report said.

The trend has even afflicted cookbooks. The authors found that identical recipes of cookies and desserts in old and new editions of classic cookbooks, such as Joy of Cooking, specify fewer servings, which mean that portions are to be made larger.

They also noted that car manufacturers have installed larger cup holders in newer models to fit in the larger sizes of cups.

Overall, observations indicate that the portion sizes of virtually all foods and beverages prepared for immediate consumption have increased and now appear typical, the authors wrote.

They called for greater attention to portion size for healthy eating, noting that Americans tend to ignore serving sizes when buying and ordering food.

The study finds that these increases in portion size mirror the jump in obesity among Americans.

It comes just after a warning by the US Surgeon-General that obesity may overtake tobacco soon as the main cause of preventable deaths with 61 per cent of Americans considered as obese. Some 300,000 Americans die a year from obesity-related illnesses.

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