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Swelling Food Portions Help Drive US Fat Epidemic

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By Melissa Schorr

NEW YORK, Feb 01 (Reuters Health) - The increase in food portion sizes in the past three decades may have led to the simultaneous "supersizing" of the American waistline, nutritionists report.

"The trend of portion sizes has increased over time, and it really parallels the increasing prevalence of obesity," study author **Dr. Lisa R. Young**, adjunct associate professor of nutrition and food studies at New York University, told Reuters Health. "People need to pay attention not just to what they eat, but how much."

The past decades have seen an increase in obesity among Americans, while levels of physical activity have remained constant. **Young** and her collaborator Dr. Marion Nestle theorized that the surge in portion sizes may play a role in the nation's collective increased girth.

The researchers measured the portion size of menu items at various fast-food and take-out restaurants, and compared those serving sizes with the amounts recommended by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). They also examined how portion sizes have changed in the past three decades.

They report their findings in the February issue of the American Journal of Public Health, journal of the American Public Health Association.

According to **Young** and Nestle, portion sizes rose dramatically since the 1970s, and skyrocketed in the 1980s. For example, foods such as French fries, hamburgers and soda are now two to five times larger than their original sizes.

The researchers cite several anecdotal forms of evidence to bolster their case, from automakers installing larger cup holders in cars to bakers using larger muffin tins.

Because food is available at relatively little extra expense to restaurants compared to labor and other costs, it can be provided cheaply to entice consumers. However, what appears to be a bargain to the pocketbook is no bargain to the body, **Young** said.

"We need to teach people to recognize more acceptable amounts of food," she said. "If you are a member of the 'clean plate' club, and you cleaned your plate 20 years ago and you clean your plate today, you will be eating twice as much."

The investigators also found that the vast majority of food measured exceeded the daily allotments recommended by both the FDA and the USDA. For example, the USDA's recommended serving size for a cookie is half an ounce, while the average cookie sold in the restaurants was 700% larger.

The standards used by the USDA and the FDA are based on traditional self-reports of eating habits, which tend to be faulty because people typically underestimate how much they eat, Young said.

"The standards are too small," she noted. "It would definitely help if they were standardized. If an educational message is going to exist, it should at least make sense."

SOURCE: American Journal of Public Health 2002;92:246-249.