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Supersize: Bigger than you think

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By Nanci Hellmich, USA TODAY

The next time you're asked, "Do you want to supersize that?" keep this in mind: Fast-food customers who order bigger meals consume about 500 calories more than they think, a study finds.

And overweight people are more likely to choose bigger meals than those at a normal weight. This may explain, in part, how large portions are contributing to Americans' expanding waistlines.

"One of the big dangers of fast-food lunches is that we not only mindlessly overeat, but we mindlessly underestimate how much we've eaten," says Brian Wansink, lead author of the study and director of Cornell University's Food and Brand Lab in Ithaca, N.Y.

"The more we eat, the less we think we eat," Wansink says. "Nobody is immune from doing this, from the lightest person to the heaviest person."

This could add up to a lot of calories because Americans eat an average of 159 fast-food meals a person each year, which is about three meals a week, according to the NPD Group, a market research firm.

Wansink and colleagues asked 105 adults who were finishing lunch at several different fast-food restaurants, including McDonald's and Subway, to estimate the calorie content of their meals. Participants also gave their height and weight. The researchers then looked at the food containers and calculated the meals' actual calories.

The study was conducted in three midsize Illinois cities: Decatur, Champaign and Bloomington.

Findings in today's *Annals of Internal Medicine*:

- People who ate larger meals estimated they had eaten an average of 675 calories but consumed 1,188, a 513-calorie difference.
- Those eating smaller meals guessed they had eaten an average of 419 calories but consumed 514, a 95-calorie difference.
- Overweight people's meals contained an average of 957 calories, compared with 683 for normal-weight people.
- Both overweight and normal-weight people underestimated the calories by about the same amount.

A second study by Wansink also showed that underestimation of calories is more common with larger fast-food meals.

The researchers had 40 undergraduates estimate the calories in 15 meals with different-size portions of the same foods: chicken nuggets, french fries and Coke.

The students guessed that the large meals had an average of 1,000 calories, but those meals contained an average of 1,382.

They were a lot closer on the smaller meals, estimating that they had 631 calories when they actually had 655.

Lisa Young, a nutrition professor at New York University who has studied increasing portion sizes in the USA, says it makes "perfect sense" that customers would estimate smaller meals correctly but "be clueless" about bigger ones.

People learn standard portions from food labels, the food guide pyramid, nutrition books and weight-loss classes, she says. "But the bigger a portion is, the more out of line it's going to be from the standard-serving size and the harder it is to judge how much food you're eating."

Plus, "people have no idea when they are eating outside of the home how the food is prepared, so that adds to the error in calorie counts," **Young** says

To help Americans control their weight, fast-food chains should be "shrinking portions," says **Young**, author of a 2005 book called *The Portion Teller*. "We don't need such jumbo portions.

"For example, a 32-ounce soda, which is a large at McDonald's, is 1 quart," she says, "enough for a family of four."