

Eating for Six? That Pasta Primavera Has Far More 'Servings' Than You Think

MUCH ADO HAS BEEN MADE about ever-increasing portion sizes in this country. But what exactly is a portion?

It depends on whom you ask. For cooked pasta, the U.S. Department of Agriculture defines a standard serving as one-half cup. But the Food and Drug Administration, which regulates food labels, says a standard serving is one cup. In the real world, restaurant pasta portions typically measure about three cups. That's equal to six "servings" from the food guide pyramid.

Confused? So is everyone else.

Part of the problem is that the USDA and the FDA used different methods and survey data when they each determined uniform serving sizes. The result is that serving sizes found on FDA-regulated food labels tend to be larger than serving sizes used in the USDA's food pyramid. Even so, both measures are still far smaller than the amounts typically consumed by the public.

But one of the biggest problems is that most people think a "serving" is how much they eat in one sitting. But a "serving" as defined by the government has nothing to do with how much a person should be served at any given time—it's simply a standard unit of measure, like a cup or a pint.

As a result, the USDA recommendation for six to 11 servings of grains or breads sounds like more food than anyone could eat. But six bread servings equal about six ounces; in the real world that translates to just one large bagel. The FDA says a "serv-

ing" of French fries is 2.5 ounces, but a serving of fries at a fast-food chain is typically more than twice that size.

"Every client I counsel, every student I teach—nobody understands this," says Lisa R. Young, assistant adjunct professor of nutrition at New York University and a longtime researcher into the discrepancy between real-world portions and government standards. "People are very quick to say that a serving is whatever I eat. But whatever you eat is a portion—it might be five or six 'servings.'"

All this confusion means that people who are trying to eat right in order to lose weight and stay healthy are often making big mistakes in their food choices.

A growing body of research shows that most people are blissfully unaware of how much food is being put in front of them, and they tend to eat whatever is on their plate or in a serving package. In studies using macaroni and cheese and submarine sandwiches, Pennsylvania State University researchers found adults ate at least 30% more calories when larger portions were put in front of them—even though they generally were satisfied by the smaller portions.

Package size makes a difference too. The same researchers found that women given a one-pound box of spaghetti to make a dinner for two removed an average of 234 strands. But if they were given a two-pound box and told to make the same dinner for two, they removed an average of 302 strands—or 29% more. When frying chicken, women poured 3.5 ounces from a 16-ounce bottle of cooking oil, but used 23% more—4.3 ounces—

Servings vs. Portions

Here's a look at what the government calls a "serving" compared to what gets served up in a restaurant.



FOOD	USDA	FDA	REAL WORLD
Bagel	2 oz	2 oz	6 oz
Muffin	1.5 oz	2 oz	6.5 oz
Beer	12 oz	8 oz	15.4 oz
Steak	2.5 oz	n.a.	8.1 oz
French fries	10 fries	2.5 oz	5.3 oz
Cheese pizza	n.a.	5 oz	7 oz

Source: Journal of the American Dietetic Association; Feb. 2003

Getty Images

whole thumbs to measure two ounces of cheese, which qualifies as one "serving." Two tablespoons of peanut butter looks like a ping-pong ball. A half-cup portion of cooked vegetables or a cup of salad greens counts as one government-sanctioned "serving."

The American Institute for Cancer Research, www.aicr.org, offers a simpler solution for figuring out serving sizes in its "New American Plate" campaign. The group suggests covering two-thirds of your plate with vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans. The room left can be filled with meat, chicken or fish.

Some stores offer special plates and bowls marked with lines and drawings to help people figure out the right portion size for their nutritional needs. But they aren't cheap. A plate from the British firm, the diet-plate.com, can cost as much as \$35. The AICR offers a free food-portion wheel or a \$12 set of four placemats to help illustrate appropriate portion sizes.

Of course, these methods may not be relevant when you're staring at the family-size portion of pasta or a 12-ounce steak served at your favorite restaurant. As a result, most dietitians now suggest splitting an entree or ordering only from the appetizer menu as a way to control ever-expanding portion sizes while dining out. Those portions may look too small, but it's likely that your perception has been skewed by years of supersizing. Some nutritionists have plastic replicas of food "servings" to show clients what a normal amount of food really looks like.

"As portion sizes have grown, people don't really know what a cup of spaghetti looks like on a plate," says Ellen Schuster, assistant nutrition professor at Oregon State University in Corvallis, Ore. "We have no conception of what portions are anymore."

when they started with a 32-ounce bottle. Other studies of potato chips and chocolate candies show drastic increases in snacking when the subject is given a larger bag of food.

"People are trusting someone to just put the right amount of food in front of them, and they're going to eat it," says Barbara J. Rolls, the Penn State nutrition professor who has led research into inadvertent consumption of larger portions. "That's a pretty risky strategy for trying to manage your weight."

So how many "servings" are in the food portions you typically eat? To figure it out, consider that a three-ounce "serving" of meat, fish or poultry is about the size of a deck of cards. A cup of pasta, worth two food pyramid "servings," is about the size of a fist. A teaspoon of margarine or mayonnaise is the size of a finger tip; a tablespoon is the size of a thumb tip. Use two