



Portion Size Matters

By Lisa R. Young

When asked if I wanted my pizza cut into four or eight slices, I replied, “Four. I don’t think I can eat eight.”
—Yogi Berra

Fifty years ago food portions were smaller—and so were we. Americans are gaining weight. Lots of it. A key factor in the obesity epidemic in the United States boils down to the simple fact that we eat too much.

While the abundance we enjoy may seem like a good thing, it has its dark side. Thanks to creative marketing, food portions these days are two to five times larger than they were in the past. Bagels and muffins have more than doubled in size.

A bag of popcorn at the movies was once 5 cups; now a large bucket can contain 20 cups. And if you’re one of the increasingly rare breed who eats meals at home, take a look around your kitchen. Unless your dishes are decades old, it’s likely that your plates, bowls, and glasses are larger than those your parents and grandparents had. Even the tableware in our homes has gotten larger to accommodate the new colossal cuisine.

As consumers, we’ve grown accustomed to large portions and have come to expect them, a phenomenon known as portion distortion. The terms “small,” “medium,” and “large” aren’t genuinely meaningful anymore, as manufacturers have increased the quantities associated with these sizes. When fast-food chains opened in the 1950s, a 16-ounce soda was deemed “large;” today that same amount is labeled “small.” And we’re encouraged to buy into this trend because the larger portion is usually a bargain, relatively speaking. For example, 7-Eleven’s 20-ounce Gulp usually costs around 6 cents per ounce, while a 64-ounce Double Gulp is only 2.5 cents per ounce. This is beneficial to manufacturers if the food is cheap relative

to other expenses, such as packaging and marketing, which is often the case with poor-quality mass-produced foods. It doesn’t cost the manufacturer much more to increase the portion size, and they benefit from an increased volume of sales.

Why are we enticed to buy more, rather than thinking about how much we really want or need? No one is making us buy bigger sizes, but many of us are so interested in “value” or getting a “good deal” that we often choose restaurants or products solely on that basis. In the popular Zagat restaurant guides, many of the entries focus on portion size and bargains instead of the taste of the food. We think bigger is better and want heaping platters and Godzilla-size burgers.

As portion sizes have gotten bigger, so have our waists. While a number of factors, including biological, genetic, and psychological, influence susceptibility to obesity, they don’t fully account for our expanding girth. Our genes haven’t changed much, and neither has our tendency to exercise (or not). What has changed is how much—and therefore how many calories—we eat.

The U.S. food supply currently produces about 4,000 calories per person per day—twice as many calories as most of us need. Although some of that food is wasted, it is clearly far too much food. But this doesn’t stop the major food producers from their endless quest

to find seductive new ways to get us to eat more of their products. The Burger King signature hamburger sandwich, the Whopper, started out with only a single quarter-pound beef patty and contained 670 calories. Over the years, the Whopper has morphed into a variety of burgers, and today you can order a Triple Whopper with cheese, laden with 1,250 calories. How can something that accounts for over half of the average person’s daily calorie needs possibly be marketed as a single portion? Unfortunately, most of us don’t stop to consider that. We eat more when presented with more food, without giving much thought to portion size or how many calories we’re consuming.

At some point in the vicious cycle of overeating and gaining weight, many of us turn to diets. As a nutritionist specializing in obesity, I feel like I’ve heard about nearly every diet out there—the Atkins diet, the Beverly Hills diet, the Zone diet, the South Beach diet, the cabbage soup diet, the grapefruit diet, the ice cream diet, Jenny Craig, Nutrisystem, and even the Subway diet. Despite the seemingly endless array of diets out there, the truth is, they generally don’t work in the long term. My clients’ diet sagas tend to echo with one recurring theme: losing weight just to gain it back again—and then some. Any diet that restricts calories can work in the short term, but if you don’t learn how to eat healthfully, it’s unlikely to work for the long haul.

Permanent weight loss can only be achieved through good eating habits that include an awareness of realistic, healthful portion sizes while also satisfying the appetite and the body’s nutritional needs. Dietary guidelines and food labels can be good sources of information; however, typical portions greatly exceed standard serving sizes, often leading to consumer confusion. For example, a typical restaurant portion of pasta can equal or exceed the recommended intake of grains for an entire day. Even worse, one restaurant steak may contain several days worth of meat. Furthermore, many single-serving packages, marketed for one person to consume, actually

contain 2 to 3 servings. But if you buy a 20-ounce soda that contains 2.5 servings, it isn’t likely that you’ll share it with 1.5 other people.

Although awareness of how much you eat is the cornerstone of a successful weight-loss plan, we Americans simply aren’t good at judging the number of calories in the foods we consume. Studies show that people tend to greatly underestimate their caloric intake. Keeping a food diary is the best way to be truly aware of what and how much you eat, and your eating style. A food diary will encourage you to eat mindfully and reinforce your commitment to eating more healthful foods, and to consuming less overall. For a food diary to be effective, you must be honest and accurate in recording what and how much you eat. As you gain insight into eating habits that aren’t working for you, you can begin to work on making more informed choices and developing new, more healthful habits. This is the only true path to permanent weight loss.

In addition to keeping an honest and accurate food diary and developing a better awareness of realistic portion sizes, focus on eating fewer processed foods. By now, we all know that fruits, vegetables, and whole grains are more healthful choices. And because they are naturally packed with more nutrients and fiber, they’re also more filling and satisfying. It’s certainly a lot easier to guzzle down an 800-calorie Double Gulp soda than to eat 800 calories worth of fruits and vegetables. You might also take the time to slow down and enjoy your food more fully—eating more mindfully or sharing more meals with friends or loved ones.

Experiment and find which techniques work best for you. Whatever path you take to achieving a healthier weight, know that these steps also have a profound impact on your long-term health and well-being. Then multiply those benefits by a few million. The epidemic of obesity is alarming, and immensely costly. And it can only be turned around one person—indeed, one bite—at a time.

Left to right: Siblings devour monster-sized *pan dulces* in San Antonio, Texas. A Himba boy finishes cornmeal porridge in Okapembambu village, Namibia. Mariel Booth, an NYU student and model, gathers greens at a Whole Foods Market in New York City. A family eats breakfast at home in Yazd, Iran. Competitive eater “Collard Green” Hughes at an all-you-can-eat seafood buffet in Newport News, Virginia. A plastic food artist eats lunch at home during a work break in Tokyo, Japan. © Lisa R. Young