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QUALITIES OF LIFE

Eat your vegetables . . .

What, exactly, does a serving of fruits and vegetables look like?

How you can replace massive food portions with 'smartsize' ones -- even when dining out

Julie Deardorff

Your breakfast bagel might have looked perfectly normal this morning, but during the last 30 years it has grown freakishly large.

Originally the size of a hockey puck, bagels now have a circumference of a CD. Eating just one is the same as eating five pieces of toast, enough servings of grain for the whole day.

And that 28-ounce ribeye you wolfed down last night at Smith & Wollensky? You ate the equivalent protein of 28 eggs, my friend. That's triple the amount you need--or three to four days' worth--in one sitting.

Welcome to portion distortion, an increasingly common disorder caused by the fact that food sizes are two to five times larger than they were in the past.

Bagels have ballooned, dinner plates are larger and restaurants serve obscene amounts of food. Experts say it all adds up to more calories, part of the reason that Americans are fatter than ever.

The problem is twofold: Most people have a skewed sense of what constitutes a "normal" portion size--the terms "small," "medium" and "large" are outdated and meaningless--and it's hard to back down from the challenge posed by an 18-ounce portion of chicken piccata.

"When presented with more food, you'll eat more, even if you don't finish it," said Lisa Young, a New York nutrition consultant who stealthily gathered size inflation data from stores, restaurants and delis for her doctoral thesis "It's OK [to indulge] on a special occasion, but the special occasions are happening every day."

Rather than "supersizing" foods, Young advocates "smartsizing," or learning

portion-size awareness. Supersizing is ordering the large soda (32 fluid ounces) at a fast-food restaurant. Smartsizing is requesting the child size (12 fluid ounces), even if it's not listed on the menu board. The concept is gaining credence and popularity among registered dietitians and nutritionists, now that data consistently show that portion sizes have increased in nearly every food category and exceed recommendations by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration.

In 1960, for example, a single-serving bag of potato chips was 1 ounce, and a bottle of Coca-Cola was 6.5 fluid ounces. In 2000, that bag of chips contained 2 to 4 ounces, and the bottle of Coke was 20 fluid ounces, according to Young, author of "The Portion Teller" (Morgan Road Books, \$19.95).

"The problem is you pay less per ounce for the bigger size, so there is a tendency to buy bigger and more," Young said. "But the difference is less than a few dollars. Don't be lured by the bargain. It's hard to do, but at the end of the day, your health is the best bargain you have."

Scales, measuring cups and spoons are the traditional tools for estimating portion size, but you're not likely to take them to a restaurant. A simpler approach, promoted by Young and groups such as the American Dietetic Association, uses everyday objects to help eyeball hard-to-measure foods.

Visualize your portions

A deck of cards, for example, is equivalent to 3 ounces of beef, chicken, fish or meat substitute, the recommended portion for a meal. (The new food pyramid recommends two to three servings a day.) A computer mouse is the size of a normal sweet potato. Your thumb is about 1 ounce or 1 tablespoon of peanut butter (the thumb tip is about a teaspoon). And a baseball represents a serving of cold cereal.

The idea is that once you can "see" the amounts you should be eating, and you know approximately how much you need each day from each food group (according to the new food pyramid), it's easier to prevent overeating.

"It's not that fast food is bad, it's that too much is bad," said Jim Painter, the chair of the school of family and consumer sciences at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston.

Painter is so adamant that portion-size awareness is a key to controlling weight that he created a documentary film called "Portion Size Me," which he hopes to unveil at an ADA conference Oct. 22.

Inspired and annoyed by Morgan Spurlock's "Super Size Me," Painter paid two graduate students in nutrition to eat only fast food for 30 days. But instead of

supersizing everything, as Spurlock did in his film, these students "portion sized" according to what their bodies needed.

Both students, Aaron Grobengieser, a 6-foot-2, 255-pound athlete, and Ellen Shike , a 5-foot-2, 108-pounder, ended up losing at least 2 pounds each, Painter said.

"The problem was that the restaurants rarely serve anything in the right portions," explained Grobengieser, who because of his size was able to eat larger portions than Shike. "We looked at our height and weight to determine our calorie needs."

Painter recommends two main strategies for portion control. One is to avoid "the bargain" while ordering or shopping for food, a foreign concept to most Americans. "Remember, if your pants don't fit, you must quit," he said.

Another key is to write down what you eat before you eat it, Painter said. Don't add it up, don't count the fat grams. Just write it down. The simple act of seeing what you've eaten and what you're about to ingest can keep people from snacking, he said.

"It's not so much that people don't know what to eat," he added. "It's that they need tools to help them make wise choices and know their options."

Francine Long, an internist with the clinic DuPage Health Specialists who deals with the complications of obesity, thinks people need more than tools.

Less is plenty

She is so frustrated by the situation that she wants the surgeon general to force restaurants and fast-food joints to cut their portion size by one-half to two-thirds. And she's not kidding.

"Leave the prices the same," said Long, the chairwoman of the department of internal medicine at Edward Hospital in Naperville. "Expensive restaurants that don't serve mammoth portions won't suffer. If people want a second helping, they can buy it. That's it."

Long said that of the 20 patients she might see in a day, at least 16 need a dietary and exercise consultation, even if they come into her office for other reasons. "I see the ravages of weight every day," she said. "Their knees hurt, they have stomach pain. Almost every system is affected by being obese."

The forced reduction might have made eating the right portion easier for Tammy Bogolin, who ordered the 10-ounce Grand Lux burger melt for lunch recently. Using tremendous discipline, she ate just half of the burger and gave away her

french fries. But 5 ounces is still more than the recommended serving for a meal.

"It's hard, but you just have to know when to stop," said Bogolin, 42, an administrator for the National Association of Realtors.

But when restaurants try to serve smaller portions, Americans revolt. The result is the Hardee's Monster Thickburger (46 grams of saturated fat) and Burger King's MeatNormous Omelet Sandwich (740 calories and 46 grams of fat).

The chain Ruby Tuesday trimmed portion sizes of french fries and pasta and listed nutrition data for food items in 2004, but sales dropped and customers complained and defected. In a full admission of defeat, the restaurant added the Ultimate Colossal Burger, a full pound of beef served on a triple-decker bun, with slices of American and Monterey Jack cheese.

That's four decks of cards, or double the recommended daily serving in one meal.

Better ask for a redeal.

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CD-sized pancake is plenty but go big on fruits, veggies

Reverse "portion distortion" is the common but false belief that food guidelines require heaping amounts of fruits and vegetables. In reality, most people need just 2 cups of fruits and 3 cups of vegetables from the two important food groups.

To get 2 cups of fruit, drink 1 cup of orange juice at breakfast and eat a baseball-sized apple at lunch. That's it. Or slice up a banana for your cereal and snack on a lightbulb-sized pear. You're done. (Keep pancakes and pita bread to the size of a CD.)

Nutritional superstars include blueberries, kiwi fruit, citrus and melons, while fruit juices, dried fruits and canned fruits in syrups should be limited, according to Lisa Young, author of "The Portion Teller: Smartsize Your Way to Permanent Weight Loss" (Morgan Road Books, \$19.95).

For 3 1/2 servings of vegetables, put tomato and cucumber on your salad and eat a baseball-sized serving of broccoli. Or eat 12 baby carrots, drink 8 ounces of V8 and have a cup of vegetable soup.

But don't stop there. If there's one food that should be supersized, it's non-starchy vegetables, especially asparagus, broccoli, red peppers and spinach. There's really no limit.

"Worry about portion size when the foods are fattening," Young said. "Don't worry if you have a little extra broccoli."

--Julie Deardorff

Never dine as though it's your last meal

Bridgette O'Keefe and her mother, Sarah, know how to smartsize their food. During a recent lunch in Chicago at the Grand Lux Cafe, where nearly everyone leaves with a doggie bag, the Chicagoans shared an appetizer: an order of chicken lettuce wraps that was enough food for two.

Afterward, Bridgette wanted one New Orleans-style beignet. When she was served a ridiculously large portion of eight, she forced herself to stop after two and took the rest of the sinfully tasty treats back to the office for co-workers.

Other tips from portion-size experts Lisa Young and Jim Painter:

In a restaurant

- If you're dining with someone, share an entree and a salad. Order appetizers or "half-size" portions.
- Get the doggie bag before the meal; when the food arrives, put half of it away.
- Always order extra vegetables.
- Use your hand or other objects for visual reference. A portion of cheese is about the size of your thumb. Your fist is about 1 cup or one serving of raw vegetables. A serving of fish should be the size of a deck of cards.
- Avoid buffets, family-style restaurants or all-you-can eat deals. Forget about the bargain.
- Steer clear of dishes that include the words "large," "giant," "mega" and "jumbo."
- Remember there will likely be another meal. This is not your last supper.
- Learn to cook.

At home

- Use an appetizer plate for your main dish

- Don't eat out of the bag or container--make yourself see how much you're eating.
- Write down everything you eat before you eat it.
- Don't leave food on the counter, and close an open bag.
- Scrape out the inside of your bagel.
- Eat foods with built-in stopping points, like bite-size candy bars or individually packaged things.
- Buy smaller packages of food. Try not to think about the fact that the bigger the size, the less you pay for ounce. You'll end up paying more in terms of weight gain.
- Portion out single servings of, say, a large bag of tortilla chips into storage bags. If the bag says 10 servings, use 10 bags.
- Don't buy something for tomorrow. If it's around, you'll eat it. If you want it tomorrow, you'll get it tomorrow.

--J.D.

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