

Shape Up America! Newsletter

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Size Matters

by Lisa R. Young, PhD, RD

Obesity is a major public health problem in the U.S. and its prevalence is increasing in adults and children. Overweight is associated with a variety of medical conditions including heart disease, hypertension, and type 2 diabetes. The portion sizes of commonly consumed foods eaten away from home have increased in size during the past 30 years. One reason for the increase in obesity rates may be that people are eating larger food portions and, therefore, more calories.^{1,2}

Mega size, king size, double gulp, triple burger...these are just a few descriptors you will see on a menu. A typical bagel today is equivalent to eating 5 slices of bread or 15 cups of popcorn. A steak in a steakhouse is so big that it is the equivalent in protein to eating 18 eggs.

[Here are some startling examples](#) of how portion sizes of commonly consumed foods have increased over the years.

Portion Distortion: Portion Sizes Then and Now

Food	Common Portion Size (in ounces or fluid ounces, unless noted)	
	1960	2000
Bagel	2-3	4-6
Muffin	2-3	5-7
Coca-Cola bottle	6.5	20
Chocolate bar	1	1.5-5
Potato chips, bag	1	2-4
McDonald's hamburger	1.5	1.5-8
McDonald's soda	7	12-42
McDonald's French fries	2.4	2.4-7.1
Pasta entrée	1.5 cups	3 cups
Beer can	12	12-24

Portion Shockers ³

- At Starbucks, the Short cup of coffee, at 8 ounces, is no longer on the menu. The smallest size is Tall, a 12-ounce cup that is nearly twice as big as what used to be considered a regular cup of coffee.
- 7-Eleven stores started selling 12- and 20-ounce sodas in the early 1970s. By 1988, they were selling the 64-ounce Double Gulp.
- The famous Hershey chocolate bar weighed 0.6 ounce its first year on the market. Now, the standard bar weighs 1.6 ounces, almost three times its original weight. M&M/Mars increased the size of several of their most popular chocolate candy bars four times since 1970.
- In the course of just three years — between 1984 and 1987 — the chocolate chip cookie recipe on the back of the Nestlé's Toll House Semi-Sweet Chocolate Morsels package scaled down the number of cookies it makes from 100 to 60.

With the focus on increasing obesity rates in both adults and children, we would hope that food companies would scale back on portions. However, according to my most recent research on portion sizes at large fast-food chains, portions are not getting any smaller. ⁴ In many cases, they are getting bigger. Just last year, Burger King introduced BK Stacker sandwiches in four sizes: Single, Double, Triple, and Quad. The Quad size has four beef patties, weighs over 11 ounces and contains 1,000 calories.

The largest fast-food companies are also involved in sleight of name. ⁴ For example, last year Wendy's discontinued the terms "Biggie" and "Great Biggie" to describe its French fries and soda. However, the former "Biggie" soda is now called "Medium," and the company introduced a new larger size called "Large." While McDonald's discontinued the "Supersize" soda in 2004, it is now marketing a new soda called "Hugo," the exact same volume and calorie content as the discontinued "Supersize." Unfortunately, we eat more when served large portions, and we don't even realize it.

Why should we care about large portions? With the exception of plain water, larger portions contain more calories than smaller portions. [Here is a chart](#) that illustrates this point.

Reality Check: More Food = More Calories!

Food	Manufacturer/ Eating Establishment	Calories/ Regular size	Calories/ Large or Jumbo size
Soft drink, bottle	Coca-Cola	100 cal/ 8 fl oz	250 cal/ 20 fl oz
		210 cal/ Small (2.4 oz)	540 cal/ Large (6.2 oz)
Hamburger sandwich	Burger King	320 cal/ Hamburger (4.4 oz)	920 cal/ Double Whopper (12.6 oz)
		180 cal/ Tall	300 cal/ Venti
Coffee Frappuccino	Starbucks		

		(12 fl oz)	(20 fl oz)
Popcorn	Movie theater	400 cal/	1160 cal/
(popped in oil)		Small	Large
		(7 cups)	(20 cups)

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What can we do about large portions? Learn to smartsize! One of my favorite food facts is that you can lose 10 pounds a year by cutting back 100 calories a day. That's a few less bites of a dessert, a handful less of potato chips, or a couple of fork-twirls less of pasta. To trim calories, just trim your portions.

Here are some examples of small lifestyle changes that you can live with. Each eliminates approximately 100 calories.³

- Use one teaspoon of olive oil instead of 1 tablespoon when sautéing your vegetables. Try putting your olive oil in a spray bottle. (One brand is Misto).
- Spread 1 tablespoon of peanut butter instead of 2 tablespoons on bread.
- Switch from a 20-ounce soda to a 12-ounce can. Better yet, switch to water, unsweetened flavored seltzer or diet soda.
- Order a Tall cappuccino instead of a Grande next time you visit Starbucks.
- Buy small pre-packaged bags (1-ounce portion) of chips or pretzels instead of eating out of a big bag.
- Split your favorite dessert three ways.

These tips can help you smartsize your portions when dining out, food shopping and eating at home.³

- Steer clear of restaurants with buffets and all-you-can-eat deals.
- Order "appetizer" portions or "half-size" portions. Or share an entrée.
- Eat half of what you order. Ask for a doggie bag and enjoy the rest on another day.
- When food shopping, avoid jumbo bags and boxes of food.
- Buy single-serving portions whenever possible. They may cost more, but your health and well-being is worth it.
- Read food labels. Check for the number of servings per container.
- Don't go to the supermarket when you're hungry.
- At home, don't eat directly from the refrigerator/freezer or while preparing food. Instead, sit down and enjoy your meal or snack.
- Avoid serving food "family style."
- Learn to cook. Measuring out ingredients gives you a feel for food size.

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- ⁴ Young LR, Nestle M. Portion sizes and obesity: Responses of fast food companies. *Journal of Public Health Policy* 2007;28:238-248.