

TORONTO STAR

Diet Decoder

It all comes down to how much you put in your mouth

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DIET: *The Portion Teller: Smartsizes Your Way to Permanent Weight Loss* (Morgan Road Books, \$27.95)

CREATOR: Lisa R. Young

CREDENTIALS: A nutrition instructor and researcher at New York University, Young has a PhD and is a registered dietitian.

CELEBRITY EDGE: Released in May 2005, *The Portion Teller* received rave reviews from the media: *Oprah* magazine voted it the No.1 Best New Health Book and *The Wall Street Journal* considered it one of the top six health books of 2005. Young is a celebrity on portion sizes herself; she has been featured on the *Today Show*, *ABC News*, *CBS News* and CNN and was in the film *Super Size Me*.

CLAIM: This is not a diet; it's a new way of looking at food. Young wants people to develop portion-size awareness to learn how to lose weight without counting calories. People can use simple visuals, such as a deck of cards or a golf ball, to figure out correct portion sizes for all their meals and snacks, she says. And here's her bottom line: "No matter what you eat, no matter how healthy it is, no matter what the label says — dietetic, low-fat, no-carb — the bigger the size, the more calories it has." North Americans suffer from "portion distortion" and often end up eating too large a portion of most foods. That's why, claims Young, eating correct food portions can lead to permanent weight loss.

PROGRAM: First, readers find out how to smartsizes their portions by learning about food groups, standard serving sizes, and the number of servings from each food group to eat per day. Next, Young asks readers to assess their "food personality" by using a food diary for one week; through this tool, people can figure out their eating patterns and learn strategies to manage their portions. To put strategies into action, Young provides a baseline meal plan that readers can modify to fit their lifestyle and food preferences. Portions for every meal are translated into simple visuals; a slice of toast, for example, should be the size of a CD case.

SIDE NOTES: Early in the book, Young explains the difference between a serving and a portion: A serving is a standard unit of measure, while a portion is how much food people actually put on their plate. For example, one serving of a salmon steak is 3-ounces, or about the size of a deck of cards. But a person could choose a 6-ounce portion of salmon steak, which is the equivalent of two servings.

ALLOWED: Everything. "As long as you balance your portions and make informed decisions."

PROHIBITED: Nothing.

EXPERT OPINION: Studies have shown that people tend to eat more when they are served larger portions, says Jennifer McGregor, a Niagara Region registered dietitian.

"In one North American study, moviegoers were randomly given medium or large buckets of popcorn," she says. "Those who received the larger bucket portion ate approximately 50 per cent more popcorn than those who received the medium bucket portion."

Food packaging and plate size can also influence the amount of food a person eats. McGregor says that in her experience most people can't identify a correct serving size because the modern-day food environment has distorted our view of food. A "small" soft drink from a fast food restaurant may still be too large a serving. Young children intuitively regulate their food intake; they eat when they're hungry and stop when they're full. But as we get older, our hunger meters are blunted by our extensive food environment, says McGregor.

This book does a good job of laying out the historical trend of increasing portion sizes of foods, from soft drinks to french fries to chocolate bars, over the last 50 years, she says. "It mirrors a similar and unfortunate trend for more obese North Americans." The everyday portion references in this book may help people learn to eat correct serving sizes, says McGregor. "A 3-ounce serving of food is hard to estimate," she says. "Using a visual, such as a deck of cards, is effective."

EXPERT VERDICT: "If half of your daily morning bagel looks larger than a hockey puck, this book might be for you. Modest daily diet changes, including regular exercise, can mean the difference between long-term weight gain or weight loss."

OUR VERDICT: This 256-page book, stuffed full of strategies and tips to figure out portion sizes, is an invaluable tool for people who are suffering from "portion distortion."

*Megan Ogilvie is a Toronto writer with a BSc in environmental science and an MSc from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Email health@thestar.ca. The **Diet Decoder** will appear every other week.*