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Portion Sizes

The other night while my husband was leafing through one of my nutrition magazines I overheard him exclaim, “12 servings! Everyday! How are you supposed to eat all that?” The 12 servings he was referring to was the Canadian Food Guide’s recommendation of between 5 to 12 grain products people should be eating daily. “Now granted, 12 servings *does* sound like a lot,” I explained to my loving husband, who at that moment was having fantasies of spaghetti for breakfast, lunch and dinner, “but remember, one regular-sized bagel is equal to *two* servings.” He was not impressed. He, like most people, assumed that one serving was equal to the portion size that manufacturers package their food in. For example: one bagel would be equal to one serving, as would be one bag small bag of chips, one Gatorade and so forth. I realized then that there was confusion on both what types of foods are recommended as well as the size of the portions we purchase or order. I told my husband that I was sure that a lot of other people were not hip on the issue of serving size either, so maybe I should write a column on the topic. He concurred with me, but he did ask not to be mentioned in the column. Sorry honey.

In the last twenty-five years there has been a direct connection made between portion sizes and obesity in North America. Researchers have concluded that portion sizes have steadily increased since the 1970s, and the amount of food we are eating has increased in tandem. People want to get their money’s worth when it comes to their food and companies, manufacturers and restaurants must keep up with this demand if they want to keep their customers. In contrast to practices that were common just 15-25 years ago, food companies now sell larger sizes for pennies more to push their products (e.g. Double Gulp, Supersize) and fast-food companies promote their larger itemed foods with T.V. advertising and in-store signs. Even the manufacturers of diet meals such as Lean Cuisine and Weight Watchers are now guilty of selling larger frozen dinner meals. Restaurants are using larger dinner plates, bakers are using larger muffin tins, pizzerias are using larger pans and fast-food companies are using larger drink and french fry containers. In fact, identical recipes in the old and new editions of the classic cookbook the *Joy of Cooking* specify fewer servings, meaning that the portions are expected to be bigger.

In a recent paper published by the American Journal of Public Health it was found that, with the exception of sliced white bread, all the commonly available food portions exceeded (and some of them grossly) USDA and FDA standard portions. The largest excess over the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) standards occurred in the cookie category, which were **700%** larger than recommended for a single serving, with cooked pasta (480%), muffins (333%), steaks (224%) and bagels (195%) not far behind. Today’s large soda pops weigh in at 16 oz. – 10 times the size of a Coca Cola when it was first introduced. In 1977 the average hamburger weighed 5.7 ounces.

Today it has grown to over 7 ounces. This invasion of larger food portions has added anywhere from 50 to 100 more calories per food item. When you multiply that by four or five times a day, you're looking at an additional 200-500 calories, which adds up to about 20 to 50 pounds in a year. Now factor in a sedentary lifestyle and you have super sized recipe for disaster!

You can not fault the restaurants or the food industry for this portion distortion, as they are just trying to keep up with what we, the customer, want. We need to break this vicious cycle ourselves through education and realizing there is no dignity in being a member of the "clean your plate" club.

Not sure what a portion size should be? Keep the following information in mind when dining.

VISUAL CUE	APPROX. SIZE	FOODS
Woman's fist or baseball	1 cup	Green salad Frozen yogurt Two servings of pasta or oatmeal Med. piece of fruit Baked potatoe
Rounded handful	1/2 cup or 1-2 oz.	Cut fruit Cooked vegetables, pasta, rice Pretzels, nuts or snack food
Palm or cassette tape	3 oz	One serving of cooked meat One grain serving, bread, bagel, pasta – about the size of a woman's palm, stacked 1 inch high
Thumb	1 oz.	Piece of cheese
Golf ball or large egg	1/4 cup or 2 tablespoons	Dried fruit (raisins) Peanut butter
Thumb tip	1 tablespoon	Mayonnaise
1 dice	1 teaspoon	Butter

Find out more nutrition information, as well as the best exercises you should be doing for your body, under your own trainer. Join today and not only reach your fitness goals, but crush them out of the park!