

Portion Patrol

As America's super-sized meals continue to get larger, so have waistlines. Here are methods to cut those portions down to size.

by *Kindra Gordon*

Did you know if you order a meat, fish or poultry entrée at a restaurant, the proper, healthy serving size is about the size of a deck of cards; a baked potato should be no larger than a computer mouse; and a single serving of pasta would equal the size of a tennis ball? But chances are you've gotten a plate heaped full of much more food than that.

In the last 20 years, food portions in America have nearly doubled, and with it, obesity issues in the U.S. have soared. What can we do to wage the war against weight? Health professionals suggest starting by controlling portion size.

Portion vs. serving

A portion is the amount of food you choose to eat; whereas a serving is the standard amount recommended by dietary guidelines for consumption. The Nutrition Facts panel on packaged food identifies how many calories and nutrients are in that recommended serving.

Unfortunately many people don't recognize the difference, and portions are often larger than the recommended food servings. For instance, Zonya Foco, a registered dietitian and motivational speaker on the topic of nutrition, points out that the recommended serving of juice is 4 ounces (oz.), but many fast-food restaurants offer a 12-oz. cup as the "small" size on their menu. Thus, 12 oz. becomes the portion consumed, which is actually three servings. As another example, a small bag of potato chips is typically two servings, but people eat it as an entire portion.

"In general, people overportion food because they don't understand what a serving is and/or cannot visualize what it should look like without measuring it. People really need to be able to identify or imagine in their mind what a serving size looks like," Holly Swee says. A registered dietitian and licensed nutritionist, Swee serves as director of nutrition and consumer information with the South Dakota Beef Industry Council.

When it comes to protein, such as beef, Swee explains that the Dietary Guidelines published jointly every five years by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) recommend consuming 5 oz. of protein per day, based on a 2,000-calorie-per-day diet. She adds that protein should be spread out throughout the day during meals and/or snacks.

However, many restaurants overportion beef — and other proteins — for various reasons, including: perceived value, plate coverage and product standardization.

"A 16-ounce steak and a half-pound burger simply have a 'wow' factor when they are presented; however, that doesn't mean it's best to consume the entire amount during one setting," Swee says.

Rather, a 3-oz. serving of protein — about the size of a deck of cards or a computer mouse — is the proper portion to aim for at a meal. "A three-ounce serving should fit inside the palm of your hand," Swee says.

She encourages people to visualize common household products when observing serving sizes, and says, "If you feel a serving of meat is too much to consume at one meal, save it and use it in a different

meal or snack. This will help you control your diet as well as make your dollar stretch."

She adds, "Understanding what an appropriate serving size is and what one should look like is something that people have to work at. Unfortunately, most restaurants don't base their menus on recommended serving sizes. You may benefit from actually measuring out food in your own kitchen and visualizing what that size looks like."

Good guidelines

Swee suggests using these tricks at the table next time you sit down to dine to gauge the appropriate portion:

- ▶ A 3-oz. ground beef patty compares to a hockey puck.
- ▶ A 3-oz. steak compares to a deck of cards.
- ▶ 3 oz. of beef cubes on a skewer compares to four child building blocks.
- ▶ 3 oz. of beef strips compares to three 6-inch (in.) rulers.
- ▶ 1 cup of cereal flakes should equal the size of a fist.
- ▶ ½ cup of cooked rice, pasta or potato should equal one-half the size of a baseball.
- ▶ 1 slice of bread compares to a cassette tape.
- ▶ 1 cup of salad greens should compare to a baseball.
- ▶ 1 baked potato compares to the size of a fist.
- ▶ ½ cup of fresh fruit equals one-half of a baseball.
- ▶ 1½ oz. cheese equals four stacked dice.
- ▶ ½ cup of ice cream equals one-half of a baseball.
- ▶ 1 teaspoon (tsp.) margarine or spreads equals one dice.

Additional eating tips

There are numerous ways to keep your portion size in check. Some ideas:

- ▶ Order an appetizer instead of an entrée.
- ▶ Ask for the lunch portion.
- ▶ Split a meal when you eat out, since most restaurants serve ample amounts.

Nutritionist Zonya Foco also suggests buying single portions of snack foods — such as the 100-calorie snack packs — so you're not tempted by the whole bag or box. She also likes to limit snacking by suggesting for every potato chip you eat, you eat a piece of fruit.

Most importantly, always be sure to look at the Nutrition Facts label on foods to determine the recommended serving size. You may be surprised to find that snacks such as soda and chips are often packaged in multiple servings. By monitoring the recommended serving size, you'll be better able to keep portion control in check.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Portion Patrol CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Swee also suggests that if you feel the portions are too big at a restaurant, consider sharing the meal or asking for a “to-go box.”

But just because you may be cutting back on the protein portions you are eating, Swee re-emphasizes the importance of beef in a healthy diet because it is one of the most nutrient-rich foods available. “Nutrient-rich foods are high in nutrients and low in calories.”

She adds, “Balance is the key. We need a variety of foods in the diet as well as proper portion sizes.”

**Research review**

How important is portion control to maintaining a healthy weight? A 2004 study reported in *Obesity Research* showed that controlling portion size may be the single, most-effective thing you can do to promote lasting weight loss.

In the study, researchers followed nearly 300 obese and overweight adults as they entered a weight-loss program. All of the participants received instruction in five different weight-loss strategies, including:

- 1) increasing planned exercise (walking);
- 2) increasing regular physical activity (incidental walking associated with chores or work);
- 3) cutting back on fat in the diet,
- 4) eating more fruits and vegetables, and
- 5) increasing portion control in the diet.

After two years of follow-up, researchers found those participants who spent the most time actively controlling portion size during their weight loss and maintenance efforts were more likely to lose weight. More than one-third (38%) of obese people who consistently spent the two years practicing food portion control lost 5% or more of their body weight during the study.

Practicing the other strategies also increased the likelihood of losing weight, but controlling portion size had the greatest effect. Additionally, the researchers concluded portion control may be behaviorally easier to change than increasing planned exercise for many obese individuals.

In contrast, 33% of the participants who did not consistently practice portion control gained 5% or more of their weight during the study.