

Trends in Portion Sizes

More than 60 percent of adults in the U.S. are overweight or obese, and there are twice as many overweight children and three times as many overweight teens as there were two decades ago. Part of the problem is that Americans are eating more and physical activity has not increased to maintain energy balance. Between 1970 and the late 1990s, the daily food supply in America increased by 500 calories. Although food supply is an overestimation of what people eat, dietary intake surveys show an average increase of more than 200 calories per day. Even small increases in calories can translate into significant weight gain. One contributing factor is an increase in portion sizes.

“Portion size” is defined as the amount of food one chooses to eat. There are no standards for portion sizes. On the other hand, a “serving size” is a standard amount that gives guidance as to how much to eat or identifies how many calories and nutrients are in a food. The MyPyramid provides serving size recommendations to guide people in selecting their daily food intake. For example, one half cup of spaghetti (just the pasta) is one serving from the Grain Group. If you eat two cups of spaghetti for dinner, you are actually eating four servings. Depending on age, gender and activity level, this could amount to one-third to two-thirds of the daily recommendation for the Grain Group. While there is nothing wrong with eating a “portion size” that is more than one serving, it is important to know the difference between a portion and a serving. If you eat a portion that is actually several servings, you need to balance that with the other foods eaten in the day. The portion sizes of a majority of foods sold for immediate consumption far exceed the MyPyramid serving sizes. Indeed, our perception of what a serving size is has been altered by the increasing availability and marketing of larger food portions.

The introduction of larger-size portions in away-from home and marketplace foods has increased significantly. Bagels used to weigh between 2-3 ounces. Today, the average bagel weighs 4-7 ounces. The eight-ounce soft drink has become 20 ounces and the average theater serving of popcorn has gone from three cups to 16 cups. A typical hamburger in 1957 contained a little more than one ounce of cooked meat, compared to as much as six ounces in 1997. The trend toward larger portion sizes is most evident in restaurants and fast food outlets but is also significant in homes. One example is observed in recipes used at home. Newer editions of classic cookbooks such as *The Joy of Cooking* contain recipes identical to earlier versions, but yield fewer and therefore, larger portions than before.

Meal combos or value meals have become increasingly popular. Fast food chains offer more food for only a slight increase in cost. This supersizing of meals encourages Americans to buy and eat more food under the premise that it is a good value. For only 29¢ - 49¢, a fast food meal is supersized by as much as 400 calories. Super-combo meals, which include a large drink and fries, are often less expensive than the same sandwich with a small drink and fries. Fast food chains are not the only eating establishments increasing portion sizes. Many restaurant orders are so large that the MyPyramid daily recommendations for some food groups can be met in a single meal. Larger portion sizes can easily shift a healthful meal to one of excessive calories, fat, sugar and sodium.

Children are not immune to the increase in portion sizes. Fast food chains are now targeting children ages 7 to 12 with supersized versions of their popular kids' meals. By increasing the regular hamburger to a double hamburger or double cheeseburger, the calorie content of the meal increases by 100-180 calories.

In the past, many people considered eating out to be a special treat. Indulging in a large meal at a restaurant or fast food outlet was easily balanced with more moderate meals eaten throughout the week. However, several societal shifts – such as an increase of women in the workforce, dual-income households and smaller household sizes – have increased the demand for foods prepared away from home. In addition, away-from-home foods are now more affordable and accessible than ever before. Away-from-home food consumption has increased by two-thirds from 1977 to 1995. Half of the meals eaten away from home are fast foods. As children get older, the proportion of meals eaten away from home increases from 18 percent in preschoolers to 30 percent in adolescents.