

## Portion sizes: How much is too much?

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

**A**re your eyes bigger than your stomach? These days, most people's are, because portion distortion is on the rise.

### Portion creep

Since the mid-'70s, restaurants have been dishing up increasingly larger portions of food. Consumers, exhibiting a trait as American as apple pie, have been trained to eat what's placed in front of them, including the entire apple pie if it's served to them as one big slice.

But portion distortion isn't limited

to restaurants or fast-food establishments. All things food-related have gotten bigger in the last 30 years, from the muffin tins and pizza pans in your kitchen cabinets to the cup holders in your car, which have grown larger to accommodate mega-sized soda cups. Even recipes in cookbooks have been altered to yield bigger portions than identical recipes printed in the same books 30 or more years ago.

"Your eyeballs get trained to larger portions, and you get used to it," says Dawn Jackson Blatner, RD, a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association. Eventually the larger portions look normal to us, Blatner says.

And there's this: Plates themselves have grown larger. Anyone who has inherited their great-grandmother's china can tell you how hard it is to pile spaghetti on those tiny dishes.

Studies show that expanding portion sizes

are probably contributing to America's expanding waistlines, which since the '70s, have grown in tandem with portion sizes.

To get an idea of how portion sizes have grown, take the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute's Portion Distortion Quiz online. You might be surprised to learn that the 350-calorie, six-inch bagel you ate this morning would have been three inches smaller in 1986, and a mere 140 calories. The same goes for the 610 calories you got from that 6.9-ounce serving of fast-food fries at lunch.

Twenty years ago, 2.4 ounces of fries would have looked normal to you, and the 210 calories they delivered would have filled you up just fine. And a cheeseburger 20 years ago only packed 333 calories. Today's cheeseburger? Closer to 600. It's not yet suppertime but you've already consumed 777 calories more than you would have gotten from those same three foods in 1986.

So how do you train your eyes to spot a rational ration when you see it?

Nutritionists recommend using visuals. For example, try thinking of your meal as a picnic plate with three compartments. A quarter of the picnic plate would be whole grains, such as whole-grain bread, whole-wheat pasta or brown rice. Another quarter would come from lean proteins, such as chicken, turkey, fish or low-fat milk. Half of the picnic plate would be produce, such as fruits and vegetables.

Even if people don't get the measurements exactly right, "but it's proportioned that way on their plate, it will be a very low-calorie meal," Blatner says, "and a good actionable visual to change behavior."

### Use visuals

The American Cancer Society offers additional visuals that can ease the strain of portion distortion. For example, the amount of meat recommended as part of a healthy meal is 3 ounces to 4 ounces, which is about the same size as a deck of cards. A proper portion of peanut butter is about the size of a ping pong ball. Planning on pasta tonight? Visualize a tennis ball and serve the linguine to match. Cheese? Visualize four dice before slicing into the sharp cheddar.

If you are dining out tonight, the National



Heart, Lung and Blood Institute offers a handy serving-size card online. Simply print, laminate and tuck the card into your purse or pocket to help you visualize portion sizes when you're out and about.

### Resources

For more information:

**Portion Distortion Quiz**  
<http://hp2010.nhlbihin.net/portion>

**Serving size card**  
<http://hp2010.nhlbihin.net/portion/servingcard7.pdf>

**Eating right**  
[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)      [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org)  
[www.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov)      [www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov)

### did you know?

#### Downsize your serving spoon

How much you eat can be directly related to the size of the spoon you're using to serve yourself.

In a recent experiment using a free bowl of candy, obesity researcher Andrew Geier of the University of Pennsylvania demonstrated that most people eat as much as fits in the provided serving utensil. If it's a tablespoon, they'll load it up and call it a portion. Ditto if it's a quarter-cup scoop. The phenomenon, called "unit bias," is the tendency to believe that a single unit of food is the right amount.

"The environment has a major impact on how much we're eating," Geier says.

