

# Size Matters

by Kara Baskin

Get smart about portion control—without going hungry. Your weight and health will benefit



**5 SERVINGS**

Ever-so-easy to eat in one sitting, a bagel can contain upwards of 500 calories.



**2 SERVINGS**

Even a more reasonably sized bagel of 140 calories is more than a serving.

“Supersize” portions may be a thing of the past, but only if you’re a stickler for semantics. McDonald’s eliminated the notorious category of fries and soda following the release of the movie *Super Size Me*, only to introduce a similar-sized Hugo. At Wendy’s, what was a Biggie soda, 32 ounces, is now simply called “medium.”

Indeed, despite changes designed to “get portion-control activists off their back,” says Lisa Young, Ph.D., R.D., author of *The Portion Teller Plan*, portions remain as outlandish as ever. At Burger King, for instance, a “meal” consisting of a Triple Whopper with King-size fries and a Coke serves up 2,120 calories and 107 grams of fat.

That’s an entire day’s worth of calories for an average person and about three days’ worth of fat. It’s no wonder two-thirds of Americans weigh too much and one-third are obese.

“The foods we buy today are often two, three, even five times larger than when they were first introduced to the market,” says Young. “Big portions are

## Soba

**What** "Soba" is Japanese for buckwheat. Making noodles solely from buckwheat is difficult, so it's often paired with wheat; check the ingredients if you're allergic to gluten.

**Why** Buckwheat offers good-quality protein. It also has rutin, known for protecting capillaries, and bone-building phosphorus.

**How** Soba noodles have a distinct earthy flavor and slightly grainy texture. Serve in a soup with ginger, scallions, and spinach.

**TIP** When cooking any of these pastas, check the pot five minutes before the directions suggest. Most don't have the same type and amount of gluten as regular pasta, so they can get mushy if overcooked.

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## Corn

**What** Also known as maize, this grass native to the Americas is often blended with another grain, such as rice or quinoa, to make pasta.

**Why** People with celiac disease or wheat allergies can eat corn pasta, which is gluten-free. It gets its golden color from the eye-protecting carotenoids lutein and zeaxanthin.

**How** Corn pasta is best paired with fresh flavors that won't overwhelm its delicate texture. Blend with tomato sauce, corn, cilantro, and queso fresco, a mild soft cheese.

## Kamut

**What** Pronounced *ku-moot*, Kamut is the trademark name for a type of wheat reportedly discovered in an ancient Egyptian tomb during the 1940s and then planted in the Midwest.

**Why** Kamut pasta leads the whole-grain pack for protein content at 10 grams per 2-ounce serving. It also contains healthy amounts of antioxidants vitamin E and selenium.

**How** It's firm and slightly sweet, so it nicely offsets tender, savory vegetables. Try Kamut spirals with asparagus spears and a wild mushroom sauce.

## Spelt

**What** An ancient cereal grain, spelt is more nutritious than wheat, though less widely produced (its hard hulls are expensive to mill).

**Why** A good source of thiamin and niacin, spelt pasta has more than twice the fiber of regular wheat pasta.

**How** Hearty, firm, and slightly nutty-tasting, spelt noodles stand up to rich cheeses. Layer spelt lasagna with sautéed Swiss chard, a light cream sauce, and Gruyère.

a 'bargain,' and portions are only getting larger," she says. Convenience foods, especially, foster the bigger-is-better culture, but research (and simple observation) shows that outsized portions prevail in every eating arena: restaurants, cafes, grocery stores, and our kitchen tables.

Of course, there's no one making us eat every last crumb—but it's human nature to do so. "If we're presented with a plate of food, we eat it simply because it's there," says Marion Nestle, Ph.D., author of *What to Eat*. Indeed, studies show that the bigger the portion, the more people eat. The upshot, research suggests, is that Americans today consume an average of 400 calories more per day than we did 30 years ago, says Yale University's Lisa Sanders, M.D., author of *The Perfect Fit Diet*. If that doesn't sound like much, do the math: It adds up to an extra 146,000 calories per year.

Clearly, you can't depend on the food industry to regulate your portions, and controlling how much you eat isn't simply a matter of willpower. To take charge of your weight and health, you need to understand what constitutes a healthy portion and, just as important, determine when size matters and when you can relax. Sound impossible? It's not. Here's how.

## Portions Versus Servings

First of all, portions and servings are not the same. A serving size is a standard unit of measure:  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of pasta, for example, or 3 ounces of chicken, according to the USDA. But a portion "is how much you—or a restaurant—puts on your plate," says Young. "There's no standard size."

To see how the two amounts differ, consider that if you eat a 5-ounce bagel (a typical portion size at cafes and delis) you're consuming five servings of grains. That's almost an entire day's worth in one sitting. "People think because they're eating one bagel, it's one serving. Not true," says Young.

The number of calories you should eat daily depends on a number of factors, including your age, weight, height, gender, and activity level. The USDA makes it easy to figure out your limits with an individualized food pyramid ([mypyramid.gov](http://mypyramid.gov)) that takes the above factors into account. "How many servings you get for the day will hinge on how many calories you need. People who need the lower end of calories should have fewer of those servings," says Young. "The average person requires about 2,000 calories, whereas someone who needs to lose weight might need a bit less."

Once you have a handle on how many servings you can eat, retrain your brain to recognize what a healthy portion looks like. To get started, buy measuring cups and a kitchen scale and use them for a month at home, says Tufts nutrition professor Susan Roberts, Ph.D. "A serving size of chicken is 3 ounces, for example," she says. "This can easily be weighed on a scale at home." Vegetables and grains can be measured with cups.

Of course, it's not practical to tote a scale and measuring cups everywhere you go. Learning a few visual cues can help, says Young. (Check out her list of suggestions in "Eyeballing It," page 60.) Making mental calculations at every meal may seem tedious, but with practice it will become second nature. "Eventually," says Roberts, "you will get to the point where you don't need to use measuring tools."

## Putting It into Practice

Certain foods are more problematic than others. Set your sights on limiting your portions of high-fat, high-calorie foods—dairy, breads, pastas, rice, animal proteins. "It's very easy to have 8 or 12 ounces of chicken on your plate," says Roberts. "Because it's sold in family-size portions, we don't even realize it." As for fruits and non-starchy vegetables, eat these to your heart's content. "Most people

don't get close to the recommended servings of fruits and vegetables," says Roberts, who suggests rebalancing your plate at mealtime, piling on the veggies and reducing breads and proteins. "Be especially careful about sweets like cake and cookies," she cautions. According to USDA guidelines, 10 percent of calories (about 200 for most people) can be discretionary. This translates to about two small cookies, says Roberts, but not "one of the huge things at Starbucks."

When preparing food, keep serving sizes in mind. If you're cooking for four people, make enough for four, not eight—that way, you won't be tempted to go back for seconds just because they're there. Rather than serving family style (big bowl of pasta and sauce in the center of the table), serve up sensible portions at the stove, says Roberts. Avoid eating from jumbo-sized bags of chips, even if they're the healthy kind; research shows that the larger the package, the more we eat without realizing it. And make eating in front of the television an exception rather than the rule.

Restaurants may be the most dangerous portion zones. You can't control how much you're served, baskets of bread or chips abound, and the festive atmosphere and alcohol consumption that often accompany dining out encourage overeating. To help you stay on track—or at least avoid a complete freefall—Nestle offers a few tips. "I rarely order entrées anymore; even appetizers have expanded to the size of regular meals," she says. Splitting an entrée between two or three people works well, she says, as does asking the waiter to pack half your meal in a to-go box before you dig in.

Whether you're eating at home or out, shunning bland foods for flavorful choices may help you feel satiated faster, in turn helping you adhere to serving sizes, say some experts. "Studies don't prove it, but it makes sense," says Roberts. "Think about it—you can

## Eyeballing It

If you don't have easy access to a food scale, it's helpful to use everyday objects to visualize healthy portions. Lisa Young, Ph.D., R.D., author of *The Portion Teller Plan*, offers the following visual cues.

½ cup pasta or rice	=	half a baseball
1 teaspoon oil	=	water-bottle cap
3 ounces meat, fish, or poultry	=	deck of cards
1 ounce bread	=	CD case
1 ounce hard cheese	=	4 dice
¼ cup nuts	=	golf ball
1 potato (white or sweet)	=	computer mouse
2 tablespoons salad dressing	=	shot glass

eat much less dark chocolate than you can light." Rather than mac and cheese, try pasta puttanesca or fra diavolo, suggests Sanders, and try topping your baked potato with salsa.

It's natural to feel a bit deprived as you start to reign in your portions—but it will pay off. "You might not get that extremely stuffed sensation you're used to," Roberts admits, but this is a good thing. Besides keeping your weight in check, thereby fending off a range of serious illnesses, smaller portions will reduce your chances of indigestion and post-meal sluggishness. "Overall," she says, "you end up feeling better for having eaten less."

By the same token, know that every now and then self-control is bound to fly out the window. The healthiest way to deal, say experts, is to let it go. "No single meal is going to do you in," says Sanders. "It's the pattern of how you eat that matters."

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