

EPICURIOUS

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Size Matters

Kathryn Matthews tells us that how much you eat is as important as what you eat

A few weeks ago, my husband and I popped into a trendy, upstate New York restaurant for dinner. I was hungry enough to consider ordering the "create-your-own-sandwich" option. In the end, I took a pass — and was glad for it, because the man next to me did order his own sandwich, which turned out to be a towering inferno of a half-pound beef patty piled high with smoked onions, bacon strips, and melted Gruyère cheese, and engulfed by an enormous ciabatta roll. His burger, served with a mountain of skinny fries, dwarfed the (large) plate, and there wasn't a vegetable in sight. Less than 20 minutes later — save for a few forlorn fries — his plate was clean.

Welcome to dining in America.

"Portions are two to five times bigger than they were in the 1980s," says New York City registered nutritionist **Lisa Young**, author of *The Portion Teller* (Morgan Road Books). And it's not just family-style restaurants that are overfeeding us. "Across the board, we're getting at least twice as much food as we need — and eating it," says Young.

Living (Too) Large

Bigger is not better. Certainly, not for America's collective waistline. Since 1980, there has been an 81 percent increase in the number of overweight adults and a 174 percent increase in the number of obese adults in the United States. According to current statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, this means that an estimated two thirds (65 percent) of all Americans aged 20 years and older are classified as either overweight or obese. Almost one third (31 percent) of Americans aged 20 years or older — that's 60 million-plus people — are characterized as obese.

Kids, too, are suffering the consequences of outsized food portions. Results of the most recent National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey report that approximately 16 percent of children and adolescents aged 6 to 19 years are overweight.

Waste Not, Waist Expands

There are many reasons for this gain. Compounding the problem of inexpensive food being served in gargantuan portions is our tendency to clean our plates. In her research, Barbara Rolls, a nutritional-science professor at Penn State University, discovered that people will generally always finish what is placed in front of them — and bigger portions on a plate encourage overeating by as much as 56 percent! And while more of us are now aware that we live in a supersize food culture, a recent study conducted by the American Institute for Cancer Research revealed that the percentage of Americans who say they clean their plates — no matter how much food they are served — has actually *risen* from 30 percent in 2003 to 54 percent (159 million people) today.

Supersize portions have also infiltrated the home. It is now possible to buy trendy restaurant-style tableware — huge 15- or 16-inch plates and big glasses — for your table. Supermarkets and stores like Costco and Wal-Mart offer bargains when you buy food in bulk. Even cookbooks have supersize recipes. "In 1975, a brownie recipe in *The Joy of Cooking* made 30 brownies; that exact same recipe in the 1997 version of the cookbook only made 15 brownies!" **Young** says.

So, how can we overcome portion distortion?

Back to Basics

For starters, count calories. That is, figure out how many calories you can consume daily. How? Go to www.mypyramid.gov/mypyramid/index.aspx to calculate this figure for you, based on age, gender, and level of activity. According to Christine Gerbstadt, a registered dietitian and spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association, the typical adult woman can consume around 2,000 calories daily, and an adult man can consume between 2,200 to 2,400 calories daily. Bear in mind that one size doesn't fit all; these calorie guidelines may be higher or lower, depending on level of activity and age.

It's also important to understand the difference between a portion and a serving; one portion does *not* equal one serving. A portion is how much food you choose to eat, whether you are dining at a restaurant, pouring cereal out of a box, or plating food in your own kitchen. A serving is a standard measure set by the U.S. government. For example, if you are aiming for a daily 2,000-calorie intake, the new Food Pyramid guidelines recommend that your day's total meals include the following: 6 ounces of grains, 5.5 ounces of meat, 2.5 cups of vegetables, 2 cups of fruit, 3 cups of milk, and 6 teaspoons of oil.

Unfortunately, people often confuse portions with servings. This is especially true when it comes to foods in the bread group, says **Young**, who cites the bagel as a prime offender. In 1960, a bagel weighed about 3 ounces. Today, an average bagel weighs about 6 ounces. Eating one 6-ounce bagel equals six grain servings — not one serving of grain! Put another way, this bagel is equal to six 1-ounce slices of bread. "People eat in units — it's human nature. So, while you might never consider eating six slices of toast, you wouldn't think twice about eating one bagel — no matter how big it was," Young says. What this means, too, is that you've eaten your allotted grain servings (six) for the day and should plan to skip rice, potatoes, bread, and pasta at other meals.

Here are a few other misperceptions that lead to portion distortion:

Of men and meat. "Men tend to think they need much more protein than they actually do and that the best way to get it is through meat," says registered dietitian Milton Stokes, chief clinical dietitian at St. Barnabas Hospital in New York City. In fact, only 15 percent to 20 percent of daily calorie intake should come from protein. So, 3 to 4 ounces of meat (about the size of a deck of cards) is an adequate amount — even for men who are athletic. And, Stokes points out, "We can get protein from a variety of foods besides

meat, including beans, nuts, dairy, soy — even vegetables and grains have some." The bottom line: Men who down a 20-ounce steak in one sitting are eating enough meat for several days.

Kids are growing and should eat, eat, eat, right? Not so, according to registered dietitian Marilyn Tanner, a pediatric dietitian at St. Louis Children's Hospital: "Children are constantly bombarded with adult-sized portions." What is a proper kid-size portion? As a rough rule of thumb, says Tanner, 1 tablespoon of food unit per year of age. So feed a 1-year-old about 1 tablespoon of food, a 2-year-old, 2 tablespoons, and so on. Once they go to school at age 5 or 6, they can use their own tightly clenched fist as a portion guideline. Emphasizes Tanner: "Parents play an important role in whether their kids eat healthfully. They're very impressionable, and unconsciously mimic their parents' food preferences and meal habits — including portion sizes."

Liquid calories don't count. Fact: Jumbo beverages, like a Venti-size Frappuccino, Big Gulp soft drink, or Power Jamba Juice, can pack on pounds. "With the smallest-size beverage starting at 16 ounces, you can easily guzzle 500 to 1,000 extra calories," Gerbstadt says.

You can eat bigger portions of "healthy" foods. Sadly, it is possible to get too much of a good thing. Whole-wheat bread is better than white bread; whole grains, like quinoa, are superior to white rice; 100 percent fruit juice trumps a soft drink. But just because something is considered "healthy" doesn't give you license to eat twice as much, **Young** cautions. "You still have to watch how much you're eating, because an 8-ounce whole-wheat bagel, a 24-ounce fruit smoothie, or a bag of nuts still have tons of calories." Size Matters

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Portions Gone Wild

It's a typical day; how much are you really eating? These examples from **Young's** book *The Portion Teller* shed some light:

- **Bran muffin (6.5 ounces):** Six-and-a-half grain servings. Fulfills more than one day's worth of grains.
- **Fruit smoothie (16 to 24 ounces):** Three to four fruit servings. Fulfills almost one day's worth of fruit.
- **Latte or cappuccino (Venti, 20 ounces):** Two dairy servings. Almost one day's worth of dairy.
- **Sandwich filling only — tuna, turkey, chicken, or roast beef (6 ounces):** Two meat servings. Fulfills one day's worth of meat.
- **Panini or other specialty sandwich (bread only):** Six grain servings. Fulfills one day's worth of grain.

- **Pasta entrée (3 cups):** Six grain servings. Fulfills one day's worth of grains.
- **Cooked 18-ounce steak at a steakhouse:** More than three servings of meat. Fulfills three days' worth of meat.
- **Chicken, fish, or beef entrées (6 to 9 ounces, cooked):** Two to three meat servings. Fulfills more than a day's worth of meat.
- **Wine (one glass, 8 to 10 ounces):** Restaurants pour up to double what the USDA deems one serving, 5 ounces of wine. Fulfills more than the daily recommendation.

Visual Cues

Discover how much you're actually eating by measuring your food, experts advise. Gerbstadt recommends you invest in a \$20 kitchen scale, measuring cups, and measuring spoons. Take 30 minutes to learn what 1/2 cup of rice, 2 tablespoons of peanut butter, 3 ounces of cooked meat, or 1 cup of vegetables actually looks like on a plate. "Once you familiarize yourself with the visual," Gerbstadt says, "you can better eyeball portions in the future."

No measuring utensils? Can't be bothered to measure? Then use your tightly clenched fist to estimate portion size. "There's no excuse for oversized portions when you have two fists to help guide you," Tanner says.

Men especially, Stokes says, can automatically downsize portions by filling up half a plate with nonstarchy vegetables (such as broccoli, bell peppers, and salad greens), one quarter with a starch or whole grain, and one quarter with lean meat.

Other Visuals to Help Eyeball Portions		
Baseball or a woman's fist	1 cup	Applicable foods: Green salad, frozen yogurt, medium piece of fruit, baked potato
Size of a rounded handful	1/2 cup	Cut fruit, cooked vegetables, pasta, rice, pretzels, snack food
Large egg or golf ball	1/4 cup	Dried fruit, like raisins
Deck of cards	3 ounces	Meat, poultry
Checkbook	3 ounces	Grilled fish

Thumb tip	1 tablespoon	Mayonnaise, oils, dips
Six dice	1.5 ounces	Cheese
One die	1 teaspoon	Margarine, spreads
Source: USDA Agricultural Research Service		

Other Portion Tips

Mindful eating and drinking goes a long way toward managing portions. Try the following:

- Pay attention to plateware. If you're at a family-style restaurant or buffet, ask for smaller salad or bread plates before serving yourself.
- Party sensibly. At social gatherings, eat a little of everything, not a lot of any one thing; don't stand near the food; and when it comes to alcohol, stick to wine or beer. The added sugars in mixed or fruity cocktails served in a very tall glass can range from 400 to 1,000 calories. And, Stokes also points out, "Alcohol simultaneously increases appetite and lowers inhibition, a potential problem if you're trying to manage portions and eat healthier."
- Choose smart starters. Begin your meal with salad, a vegetable, or a tomato- or broth-based soup. By the time you get to the entrées, you won't crave a huge amount, Stokes says.
- Take half measures. At restaurants, eat only half of what's on your plate; when you order your entrée, tell the waiter to pack up half in a doggy bag before serving it to you; order an appetizer portion of pasta; share one sandwich or burger; ask if they allow you to take home a bottle of wine you don't finish.

The Home (Cooking) Advantage

"The beauty of home cooking is that you can prepare more-healthy meals," Tanner says, "using less salt, sugar, and fat and introducing more fruits and vegetables." To prevent supersizing at home:

- Measure and weigh your food.
- Don't feel pressured — or pressure your kids — to eat everything you make.
- When you cook in large quantities (stews, chilis, etc.), apportion what you're not going to eat immediately into single servings, and freeze them so you won't be tempted to polish off the whole batch.

- Read food labels. Avoid eating food straight out of a bag, box, or can. Instead, measure out a single serving and eat it off a plate.
- Avoid eating in front of the television or while busy with other activities.
- Set out vegetables and fresh fruit as predinner snacks; they're fiber-rich and filling, so you're more likely to eat smaller portions at dinner.
- Savor your food. Eat slowly and wait 20 minutes before getting seconds, giving your brain a chance to register fullness.

USDA Serving Recommendations for Adult Women and Men Daily calorie intake will vary, depending on age, height, and level of activity		
	2,000 Calories (Reference Woman)	2,200 to 2,400 Calories (Reference Man)
Fruits	2 cups	2 cups
Vegetables	2.5 cups	3 cups
Grains	6 ounces	7 to 8 ounces
Meat and Beans	5.5 ounces	6 to 6.5 ounces
Milk	3 cups	3 cups
Oils	2 tablespoons	6 to 7 teaspoons
Discretionary Calorie Allowance	267	290 to 362
Source: USDA, Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, April 2005		

Kathryn Matthews is a New York–based food and nutrition writer.