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PORTION PATROL: COOKIES

Cookies need not be monster diet-busters

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Today's favorite food: The Girl Scouts sell them; grandmothers everywhere love to bake them; and dessert lovers just can't stop dunking them in milk. Cookies are among the most conveniently portable and potentially diet-detrimental desserts to line store shelves and bake sale tables. Still, you don't have to sacrifice your sweet tooth for slimmness and nutrition – some cookies are better than others.

Lisa Young, Ph.D., R.D., author of "*The Portion Teller*," recommends reaching for oatmeal-raisin or whole-grain cookies, "if you can find them." Or, better yet, bake them yourself. "Homemade cookies are probably better than store-bought varieties because you know they are fresh and have fewer preservatives."

If you do opt for commercially prepared cookies, be sure to remember that the fat-free label does not mean free of calories or completely guiltless. "They are better than high fat," Young adds, "but only if you like the taste and can stop at one cookie. Eating a box of fat-free varieties defeats the whole purpose."

Even if you do opt for the healthier varieties, cookies still fall under the discretionary calories section of the government's food pyramid because this group consists of "sweetened bakery items," among other indulgences. The number of discretionary calories recommended for consumption is based on age, gender and activity level, ranging between 195 for an inactive 31-to 50-year-old woman to 510 for an active 19-to 50-year-old man.

Whatever you do, Young recommends limiting the tempting chocolate-covered cookie. It's a sure way to consume your discretionary calories all in one sitting. And watch your portion size: Large bakery cookies can be at least twice the size of a serving. The new 100-calorie snack packs of certain cookie varieties are an easy way to watch your portion size and still satisfy your sweet tooth.

One serving cookies: 2 cookies = 2 tea bags

Oreos

Calories: 107

Carbohydrates: 16.8 g

Fat: 4.7 g

Protein: 1.3 g

Famous Amos Oatmeal-Raisin

Calories: 70

Carbohydrates: 10 g

Fat: 3 g

Protein: 1 g

New government diet regulations make constructing your daily dietary intake as simple as building an actual pyramid. But with help visualizing portion sizes, at least some of the mystery surrounding your favorite foods can be solved. Visit www.MyPyramid.gov for more information.

Nutrition source: CalorieKing.com

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