

Well

PERSONAL HEALTH | JANE E. BRODY

Smaller Portions Support Lasting Weight Loss

A new book puts less emphasis on what you eat and more on how much you eat.

I HAD HOPED to avoid ushering in the new year with yet another weight/diet column, but three circumstances prompted me to reconsider:

1) The latest data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showed that the weight of American men and women has continued its upward climb, with the average body mass index now almost at the cutoff for obesity;

2) The Food and Drug Administration is rolling out changes in serving sizes on packaged foods that could very well make matters worse, especially for consumers of ice cream and soda; and

3) Some good news for a change: the publication of an eminently sensible approach to weight loss, “Finally Full, Finally Slim,” written by a leading expert on portion control, Lisa R. Young, a registered dietitian and adjunct professor of nutrition at New York University.

Unlike the myriad diet fads that have yet to stem the ever-increasing girth of American men and women, what Dr. Young describes is not a diet but a practical approach to food and eating that can be adapted to almost any way of life, even if most meals are eaten out or taken out. It is not prescriptive or even proscriptive. It does not cut out any category of food, like carbohydrates or fats, nor does it deprive people of their favorite foods, including sweet treats.

And it works. I know, because more than half a century ago, I lost 40 pounds in two years following Dr. Young’s approach, and I’ve kept the weight off ever since without dieting or deprivation. It fills me up with delicious, nutritious foods and allows me to enjoy a frequent nightcap of ice cream — half a cup (measured) at 150 calories or less.

Dr. Young’s emphasis is less on *what* you eat and more on *how much* you eat of any food, including those considered healthy. Which is one reason I worry about potential damage from the mandated changes in serving sizes now being phased in, which could encourage those aiming to stick to a single serving to overeat.

For better or worse, the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act of 1990 requires that serving sizes listed on Nutrition Facts la-



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bels reflect *current eating habits* — how much people actually eat as opposed to how much they should eat. And since Americans now consume considerably more of most foods than they did three decades ago, the serving sizes on food labels will increase accordingly.

As a result, a serving of ice cream, for example, which for many decades has been listed as one-half cup, has now grown to two-thirds of a cup. And a serving of soda, long eight ounces, is now 12 ounces. And a packaged food usually consumed at one sitting, including a 20-ounce soda, is also considered one serving.

The good news is that the calories in that serving now appear in large bold type on the label, so that if people consider how many calories they would be consuming, they won’t be hoodwinked. (Another virtue of the new labels is the separate listing of “added sugars,” distinguishing these commercially introduced sweeteners from sugars that occur naturally in foods like milk and fruits.)

A practical approach to food and eating that involves portion control can be adapted to almost any way of life.

But back to portions. If you’re serious about losing or maintaining weight, you’d be wise to learn the size of a healthful portion of various categories of foods and treat what is typically served in restaurants to individual diners as servings for two or more. My “lean and mean” son and daughter-in-law in Los Angeles routinely order one entree for two people, and often have leftovers to take home for lunch the next day. In fact, my daughter-in-law usually requests a to-go container when the meal is ordered and packs up the excess food even before they dig in.

Still, Dr. Young insists — and I agree — that it’s far more helpful to prepare and eat most of your meals at home. You’ll know what’s in them (was that grilled fish you ordered prepared with a tablespoon of butter?) and how much lands on your plate. In fact, start by downsizing your dinner dishes to salad-plate size, and you can save nearly 600 calories a meal. Use measuring cups to dole out reasonable portions until you are able to eyeball them accurately. You might

also invest in a kitchen scale to help you keep meat, poultry and fish servings to three or four ounces.

I know you’ve heard this before, but it bears repeating: Fill half or more of your plate with low-carbohydrate vegetables, like broccoli, cauliflower, spinach, green beans, carrots and brussels sprouts, and have a side salad with a drizzle of dressing. Limit starchy vegetables like white and sweet potatoes (baked, not fried) and grains (whole, not refined) to a half-cup serving, one cup max.

Dr. Young urges people to get over their fear of carbohydrates. “If you’re eating the right kinds of grains in the right amounts, they don’t make you fat,” she wrote. “They make you full — and provide you with a battalion of disease-fighting nutrients.” But watch out for those oversized New York bagels, whole grain or otherwise, that are the caloric equivalent of six slices of bread.

Many people are unaware of how much, or how often, they eat. Keeping a food diary, recording everything you consume and where for a week or so, can help you recognize sources of mindless or excess consumption and their relationship to your feelings and circumstances.

Be wary of “nutrition halos” — foods deemed healthful but loaded with calories, albeit from healthy fats. A friend who moved to California gained 25 pounds in a year eating avocados from the tree in her yard. A serving of avocado is a quarter of a cup. Same for nuts, which, along with air-popped corn, are my favorite snacks.

At the same time, Dr. Young and I recognize the dangers inherent in feeling deprived of cherished, not-so-good-for-you foods. When I was shedding those 40 pounds, I included one small treat a day — a few tablespoons of ice cream, a small cookie, a slice of quick bread, or sliver of cake or pie — lest after weeks of no treats I break down and devour half a cake or quart of ice cream at one sitting.

Dr. Young suggests incorporating “treats and sweets” into your food plan a few times a week, though perhaps not every day while you’re trying to lose weight. And, as Dr. Sylvia R. Karasu, clinical professor of psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medicine, points out in her fun- and fact-filled new book, “Of Epidemic Proportions: Expanded Edition 2019,” it helps to keep those treats out of sight and easy reach.