

# The Secret to Eating Healthier

It's controlling the amount of food that you put on your plate. Here's how.

**M**any people assume some personal failing when they find it challenging to stick to a healthy diet. What we often forget, however, is that some of the most easily available, affordable foods are made with craveability in mind rather than nutrition. They're also the ones most likely to be sold in oversized portions, says Lisa Young, PhD, RDN, an adjunct professor of nutrition at New York University.

Studies have shown that people tend to consume larger portions of less-than-healthy foods—think snack foods, desserts, and restaurant fare—and smaller helpings of healthier ones, such as whole grains and vegetables.

That has implications for weight, of course, especially for older adults. Metabolism slows with age, and calorie needs decrease as a result. This may lead to weight gain if you are still eating the same size portions you did 10 years ago.

But the importance of right-sizing portions goes beyond that. Large portions of processed food can also up your intake of sodium, added sugars, and saturated fat—nutrients that can raise the risk of heart disease and other health issues when eaten in excess. And when you eat a lot of them, it leaves little room in your diet for foods that can fill you up for fewer calories and help your health. “When we eat more processed foods, we’re losing the opportunity to eat fruits and vegetables that would provide more vitamins and fiber,” says Sandra Arevalo, RDN, director of community and patient education at Montefiore Nyack Hospital in New York.

This jumbo challenge to balanced eating shows little sign of improving anytime



soon, despite efforts from public health authorities. For nearly two decades, Young and her NYU colleague Marion Nestle, PhD, have been tracking the package size of foods like candy bars, soda, and fast foods sold as single servings. Their 2021 report published in the *American Journal of Public Health* found that food companies and fast-food chains are selling “single-serving” foods in amounts up to five times larger than when they were first introduced. For example, the first McDonald’s hamburgers were 1.6 ounces. Now the chain offers burgers in sizes ranging from 1.6 to 8 ounces. “We often eat with our eyes and not our stomachs,” says Young. “The body’s internal hunger is overridden by the large portions.”

## WHAT'S A PORTION?

That may seem like an obvious question, but a recent survey from the International Food Information Council found that

only 45 percent of Americans define it correctly: the amount of food that you choose to eat, or are given to eat, at one time. About a third of those surveyed confused portion size with serving size. A serving is a standardized measure of food, set by the Food and Drug Administration, for use on nutrition facts labels.

This distinction matters because although serving sizes are based on typical consumption, individuals may need less—or more. The serving size isn’t a recommendation; it’s intended to convey information, Young says. People also may think they’re taking in the amount of calories and other nutrients for the serving listed on the label, when they may actually be getting more. For example, a serving of ice cream is set at two-thirds cup. If that serving has 330 calories and 19 grams of added sugars but you eat 1 cup, you’re downing about 500 calories and 29 grams of added sugars.

## WHY WE EAT MORE THAN WE THINK

Have you ever noticed that you tend to finish a plateful of food or a bag of cookies without really thinking much about how much you just ate? That may be due to something called “unit bias,” a sort of mental shortcut identified by psychologists at the University of Pennsylvania. When your brain sees a unit of food that could reasonably be consumed in one sitting, it assumes that it is the right amount for one portion—no matter how big (or small) it is.

People who live in other countries are often taken aback by how large food portions in the U.S. are. If you’re used to American food, this may never have occurred to you. This may be because of the “portion size effect,” or the idea that frequent exposure to oversized portions makes them seem ordinary. A sense of normalcy around huge portions can lead us to consume more food than we need. “Research shows that we eat more when presented with more food—even if we are not hungry,” Young says.

Cost can also be a factor. If you’re stretching your money and a large box of crackers is the same price or just a bit more than the “normal” size, it can be tempting to buy more than you need in the name of value. But those larger packages can lead to overeating.

## PERSONALIZE YOUR MEALS

So if unconscious cues influence what and how much we eat, what can we do to counter them? Tuning in to your hunger and your body’s nutritional needs can be a terrific place to start. “When you focus on the present and pay attention to eating, you often do eat less,” says Young.

What a “right-sized” portion is varies, depending on age, activity level, and more. It can be helpful, though, to think about how a portion fits into your overall needs. For the average adult, the U.S. dietary guidelines recommend around 5½ ounces of protein, 3 cups of low-fat or fat-free dairy, around 2 tablespoons of oil, 6 ounces of grains, 2½ cups of vegetables, and 2 cups of fruit per day. Keep added sugars intake to 200 calories or less per

day, and if you choose to eat candy, cookies, desserts, and other foods with little nutritional value, stick to small portions.

An easy way to match your portions with the guidelines is to use the divide-your-plate strategy. At meals, at least one-half of your plate should be fruits and vegetables, which are low in calories and high in nutrients. One-quarter should be lean protein and one-quarter grains or starchy veggies, such as potatoes.

Another tactic is to stick to no more than the serving size on the package when you’re eating processed snacks and desserts. If the amount seems too skimpy to satisfy, rather than doubling the serving, combine it with a healthier food. “If you are eating processed foods next to a salad and a protein or grains, it’s easier to control your portions and eat a variety of nutrients,” Arevalo says. For example, if you want tortilla chips, have a serving (which is an ounce, or about 10 to 15 chips) with ¼ cup salsa or pico de gallo, which counts as a veggie. Craving chocolate ice cream? Round out a ⅔ cup serving with half a cup of berries or top it with ¼ cup of nuts. (For more ideas, see “4 More Ways to Pare Your Portions,” at right.)

Portioning out individual servings from “value size” or jumbo bags that you buy to save money can help you eat more reasonable portions. It can also help keep the large package cost effective, because it is likely to slow down how fast your family goes through it. “While we may eat several servings from a big bag of chips, we are unlikely to open a bunch of small bags,” says Young.

For more precise guidance on the right portion sizes for you, check [myplate.gov](http://myplate.gov), where you can plug in your information and get recommendations to meet your needs. Or consult with a registered dietitian who can “sit with you, listen to your needs, and match foods not only to your healthcare needs but also to what you enjoy eating,” says Arevalo.



LEARN

For perfectly portioned meal and snack ideas, go to [CR.org/mealideas](http://CR.org/mealideas).



## 4 More Ways to Pare Your Portions

These tips will help you call the shots when it comes to oversized, processed food items.

➤ **Measure your snacks.** Pre-packaged in single servings can be more expensive—and more wasteful, when it comes to packaging. Buy regular packages of chips, cookies, and crackers, and divide them into individual portions using reusable containers so that they’re ready (and self-contained) when you’re in the mood to munch.

➤ **Flip your bowl.** Instead of a heaping mound of cereal with a few berries and a splash of milk, reverse the order. Have ¼ cup cereal and bigger servings of fruit and milk or yogurt (for satiating protein).

➤ **Order small.** Despite continued huge portions at fast-food restaurants—for example, Burger King now sells a Triple Stacker King sandwich that clocks in at almost 1,400 calories—there’s no obligation to order them. A regular old hamburger and small fries or salad could make a tasty and manageable meal.

➤ **Mind the gap.** Try to use each snack or meal to help you get nutrition you fall short on. Low on calcium? Instead of a row of cookies, have two cookies crumbled on low-fat yogurt. Have trouble eating enough produce? Have a handful of grape tomatoes alongside a serving of pretzels.