

Serving Portions

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When I address the issue of serving size to my students, the first response I get is, “You’ve got to be kidding!” The next is the realization that they have been overeating for years. I mean, how were they to know that a serving size for a pancake is the size of a compact disc? Or that a serving of a baked potato is the size of a computer mouse? What? You too? So earlier this year when the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced that they are considering requiring food manufacturers to list the nutritional information for more realistic “portion” sizes on food packaging, it has been met with a mixed response.

A “portion” is the amount of food you decide to eat. For example, you eat one portion of meat, one portion of pasta, and one portion of cake. What is a portion to you may just be an appetizer to another. A portion size is not necessarily the same as a serving size since a serving size is the quantity designated by the food manufacturer. Also, a serving is not necessarily the recommended amount people should eat. However, they are to be considered a point of reference. The current serving size on food packaging was updated in the early 1990’s. Before this, food manufacturers could call whatever size they wanted a “serving size.” Typically, they would pick a serving size that would portray the nutrition information in the most appealing light (e.g., an unrealistically small serving size so the calorie numbers are low). Cereal companies often used this to their advantage and would typically choose one ounce as a serving size. One ounce is approximately the weight of 10 pennies. Visually, this is about $\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of cold cereal. I don’t know about you, but $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of cereal would barely register in a colossal cereal bowl. But by choosing one ounce as the serving size, the calorie per serving is low (e.g., 90-100 calories per one ounce serving) leading many consumers to focus on the calorie level without really paying attention to the volume of food. Plus, it was almost impossible to compare products since the nutrition information displayed might be for different serving sizes.

Uniformity and realistic serving size were FDA’s goal when they revamped the food label. The FDA utilized the survey data of Americans from the 1970-1980s to determine the typical eating habits and portion sizes for various foods. These portions became the standard serving sizes and were used on the updated food labels.

Unfortunately the method of establishing these serving sizes was flawed. The survey data was outdated and was based on self-reported intake. In this case, people were asked by researchers to keep a food record. However, when it comes to self-reporting, participants have a tendency to underestimate how much they eat. In addition, portion sizes have increased dramatically just in the past 20 years.

Twenty years ago, a portion size of a typical muffin was only 1.5 ounces (or 210 calories) or about the size of a hockey puck. Today, the muffin has more than doubled

in size to 4.0 ounces (or 500 calories). A portion of a chocolate chip cookie was measured at 1.5 inches in diameter. Today, the cookie is 3.5 inch in diameter. The difference in size also means a difference of 220 calories. A bagel was 3-inches in diameter twenty years ago; today it is 6-inches. A large container of popcorn at the movie theater twenty years ago was 5 cups. Today, it is 11 cups. In addition, we have also created sizes bigger than large such as “jumbo,” “king,” or “super.” Without a doubt, these examples confirm that our portions have been amplified, and not surprisingly, so have our bodies. Thus, the serving size of yesteryear does not reflect what is being consumed today.

There is also the designated serving size listed for each food group at mypyramid.gov. This is more of a recommended size for a serving and it comes with a recommended number of daily servings based on your age, gender, and activity level. For example, a recommended daily intake of 6-11 servings from the bread, cereal, and grain group does not mean eating 6-11 loaves of bread (even if they are made of whole grains). It means 6-11 servings where each serving is 1 slice of bread, 1 oz of cereal, or ½ cup of cooked pasta. That’s right; *HALF*-a-cup of pasta is considered one serving. Looking at these recommendations, it is easy to see how you can eat excessive servings of pasta in one sitting.

If the FDA begins to require food companies to list the nutrition content based on realistic portions, many fear that people will get the wrong message. In seeing a food package printed with the information that one serving will provide 600 calories and that one serving is say, two cups, people may get the impression that they are supposed to eat two cups. Currently, a serving of chips on a food label is 1 ounce or about 11 individual Doritos chips. A more realistic portion of chips consumed by an average person is more like 30-40 chips in one sitting. (Many times it is the whole 9.5 ounce bag). If one ounce has 150 calories, then 30-40 chips would be 450-600 calories. That is a significant difference in calories. The FDA hopes that by listing “450” or “600” calories per serving, it would stop you and me from going in for another handful. Would the shock factor of seeing “600 calories per serving” be enough to make us walk away from a food? Or would you eat all 40 chips because the label says it is a serving? This is still being hotly debated.

Obviously the current serving size on food labels is not near the amount we actually eat. But the way the food is packaged leads us to think the amount is appropriate. Take for example Pop Tarts. These pastries come two to a package (four packages to a container). However, one serving is one pastry. I have a hard time envisioning that we would stop after eating one pastry and wrap up the remaining pastry for another day. Or how about a can of Progresso soup? A serving size is one cup. However, one can contains two servings. I guess Progresso expects you to share your soup every time you open a can. In addition, the size of our food portions have grown exponentially. When presented with more food, we tend to eat more.

Unfortunately, deciphering a serving from a food label may mean we need a food scale and measuring cup readily available. However, there are handy guidelines that we can

use (without the use of scales and measuring tools) to assess if we are eating an appropriate serving. Below is a quick visual tool to use (from http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/just_enough.htm):

Serving Sizes

Everyday Objects

1 cup (a serving) of cereal or vegetable = a fist



1/2 cup (a serving) of cooked rice, pasta, or potato = 1/2 baseball



(A serving of) 1 baked potato = a fist



1 medium fruit = a serving of fruit = a baseball



1/2 cup of fresh fruit = a serving of fruit = 1/2 baseball



1 1/2 ounces of low-fat or fat-free cheese = 4 stacked dice



1/2 cup of ice cream = 1/2 baseball



2 tablespoons of peanut butter = a ping-pong ball



Other tips include (from [healthyeating.webmd.com](http://www.healthyeating.webmd.com)):

- A deck of cards—a serving (3 ounces) of meat, fish, poultry or tofu
- The palm of your hand (just the palm, no fingers)—a serving of meat, fish or poultry
- A golf ball or large egg—one quarter cup of dried fruit or nuts
- One cassette tape—one (serving) slice of bread
- One hockey puck—one (serving) bagel, one muffin
- One tennis ball—about one half cup of ice cream
- A computer mouse—about the size of a small baked potato
- A compact disc—about the size of one serving of pancake or small waffle
- A thumb tip—about one teaspoon of peanut butter
- A check book—a serving of fish (approximately 3 oz.)
- One dental floss package—one brownie serving, one piece of chocolate serving

There are easy tools to make sure you are eating an adequate and not excessive serving. Keep these tips in mind when eating out. Restaurants are known for serving large portions. Many times the portions are sufficient to feed two (or more) adults. The supersized and value meals may seem like great deals, however, the only deal you get is a growing waist line. Use the tools like the ones listed above to moderate your portions. The FDA is attempting to provide us with more accurate information about what we are eating. However, it is still up to us to decide how much we are going to eat.

References:

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