



Putting Portions in Perspective **by the American Institute for Cancer Research**

A few years ago, everyone in America was talking about portion size. In the summer of 2003, AICR pointed out that the portions in restaurants had doubled, tripled and quadrupled since the early 1980s and portions served at home had expanded as well. This growth in portion size coincided with the spectacular growth in the number of overweight and obese Americans. Most experts agreed there was a cause-and-effect relation between the two growth trends.

“Whenever I pointed out to an audience that today the average American chocolate chip cookie is 700 percent larger than it was in 1982, people roared with laughter. They made jokes about cookies the size of Frisbees,” says Jeffrey R. Prince, AICR’s Vice President of Education.

“Similarly, AICR’s study of ‘supersizing’ in the food industry provoked a lot of articles in newspapers and magazines. Readers laugh at how fast food clerks routinely asked customers, ‘Would you like to supersize that order?’ The news that 12-inch plates had replaced the standard 10-inch plates in restaurants also caused quite a stir,” he adds.

Most Changes Are Up to Individuals

There was a lot of talk and laughter, but did anyone do anything about the problem? A few prominent food companies made an effort to change. Two overweight teenagers filed an obesity lawsuit against McDonald’s in 2003, and the company’s practices inspired the 2004 documentary, “Super Size Me.” McDonald’s then continued its “supersized” menu and expanded its healthful offerings such as salads and fresh fruit. A few other companies also made efforts to provide healthy alternatives. But the great majority either reneged on promises to reduce portion sizes or ignored the problem altogether. Asked why, they usually said they were giving customers what they wanted: More food for less money.

“Ultimately, each of us has to take portion control into our own hands,” Prince says. “If we want to stop weight gain or lose weight, we have to reduce caloric intake and increase caloric expenditure. The easiest way to reduce intake is to very gradually reduce the size of portions on our plates.”

AICR believes that portion control is important because cancer and other chronic diseases are linked to overweight and obesity. Research shows that being overweight specifically increases the risk of getting cancers of the colon, kidney and endometrium, as well as post-menopausal breast cancer.

A Handy Point of Reference

To manage portion size, it helps to have a point of comparison. Fortunately, the USDA’s standard serving sizes are based on averages of consumption figures gathered in 1982, before portion size skyrocketed. Therefore, they provide good measure by which to assess just how much we are eating.

Standard Serving Sizes

Chopped Vegetables - ½ cup

Raw Leafy Vegetables (such as lettuce) – one cup adult

Fresh Fruit – one medium piece (1/2 cup chopped)

Dried Fruit – ¼ cup

Pasta, Rice, Cooked Cereal – ½ cup

Ready-to-eat Cereal – 1 oz – ¼ cup to 1 ¼ cups (check label)

Meat, Poultry, Seafood – 3 oz. boneless, cooked weight from 4 oz. raw

Dried Beans – ½ cooked

Nuts – 1/3 cup

Cheese – 1 ½ oz. (if processed)

Source: USDA

AICR's New American Plate recommends that people familiarize themselves with standard serving sizes and compare them to the portions they ordinarily eat. For instance, pour the amount of dry cereal you usually eat into a bowl. Then measure out the standard serving of the same cereal into a bowl of the same size and compare.

“Ask yourself how many standard servings go into the portion you usually eat. Then ask yourself, “Do I really need that many?” Prince suggests.

Small Reductions Are Easy

If your weight is more than ideal, start by reducing your regular portions. Decrease the amount on your plate gradually to avoid hunger pangs. Each small reduction adds up to a substantial difference over time.

Recent research shows that, when larger portions are put in front of us, we automatically eat more than we ordinarily would. So, for Americans accustomed to oversized meals, cutting down the size of the portions we eat should cause little discomfort and should contribute to slow yet steady weight loss.

“Remember that eating healthy meals, exercising regularly and managing your weight are all vital parts of reducing the risk of getting cancer,” Prince concludes.

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