

Healthy Eating for the New Year: Resign from the “Clean Plate” Club By the American Institute for Cancer Research

For decades, parents have told their children, “Clean your plate.” The idea is now ingrained in our society. In a recent survey conducted by the American Institute for Cancer Research, (AICR), seven out of 10 Americans said they finish their restaurant entrees all or most of the time, regardless of the entrée size. At home, 30 percent said they eat the amount they are served.

As a result, many Americans are unconsciously eating many more calories than they need. The compulsion to clean the plate is contributing to the nation’s expanding waistline. If people knew when to stop eating, the super-sized portions served in restaurants and the bigger amounts found at home wouldn’t lead to a health problem.

To keep a healthy weight, it’s necessary to shake off passive eating habits. There are two good ways to return proportion to your portion sizes.

But the “Clean Plate Club” is a problem. Sixty-four percent of the populations is either overweight or obese. Being overweight increases many health risks, including heart disease, stroke, diabetes and cancer.

An Outmoded Relic of World Wars

The idea of the Clean Plate Club originated in World War I. President Woodrow Wilson firmly believed that “food will win the war.” To help conserve food, he created the U.S. Food Administration, which lasted until the end of World War I.

Many campaigns were devised to decrease the nation’s food consumption. One of the most successful campaigns encouraged Americans to sign pledge cards. One card read, “At table, I’ll not leave a scrap of food upon my plate. And I’ll not eat between meals but for suppertime I’ll wait.” A “Clean Plate” became the patriotic ideal for the nation to follow.

After World War II, the idea came to prominence again. To help rebuild a war-ravaged Europe, President Harry Truman called upon Americans to eat less to save food for starving Europeans. In response to his appeal, Clean Plate Clubs formed in many of the nation’s elementary schools.

New Advice for a Different Era

Since the 1970’s, portion sizes in restaurants and at home have ballooned. But “Clean your plate” still sticks in the minds of Americans, resulting in overeating. Yet the real message behind the wartime and rebuilding policy was: Eat only what you need. That message is now more important than ever.

To keep a healthy weight, it’s necessary to shake off passive eating habits. There are two good ways to return proportion to your portion sizes.

First, when dining out, as for small or half sizes or share an entrée. Choosing a regular burger instead of the quarter-pound saves about 160 calories. At a table-service restaurant, ask your server to put half of your meal in a container to take home before serving you. You can have another full meal later for the price of one.

Second, refresh your perspective on portion size. By calling AICR at 1.800.843.8114, ext. 110, you can order a free serving size wheel. Compare the USDA standard serving sizes on the wheel to your usual serving. If you usual serving provides more energy than your body needs, cut back gradually.

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