

Sizing up food portions

In the 1970s, 14 percent of Americans were obese. Now, two-thirds of us are. One reason: When Americans today sit down to eat, they find a whole lot more food on their plates.

A recent study that compared recipes from the 1936 edition of "Joy of Cooking" with those for the same dishes in the 2006 version, for example, found an average calorie increase of 63 percent per portion. A brownie recipe from the 1964 edition recommended dividing it into 30 squares; 35 years later the same recipe yielded just 16.

If big portions are a cause of weight gain, then smaller ones may be part of the solution. Two recent surveys by the Consumer Reports National Research Center back that up. In one, 62 percent of the people who had lost weight said they watched portion sizes at least five days a week, compared with 42 percent of the failed dieters. In the other, two-thirds of the people who successfully managed their type 2 diabetes practiced portion control, compared with barely half of those who were unsuccessful.

PORTIONS VS. SERVINGS

A portion is how much food you choose to eat. A serving is the amount that is

used to calculate a food's nutritional value. Your sandwich's two slices of bread are one portion; a serving of bread is usually just one slice.

Serving sizes are often smaller than what people consider a normal portion. For many folks, a standard 7-ounce baked potato may be just one portion, but it's three servings. That means it may be less daunting than you think to get the recommended five to nine daily servings of fruits and vegetables. But it also means you may be eating more calories and fat than you realize.

PORTION DISTORTION

One way to make sure you don't go overboard is to measure your food. For example, keep a measuring cup near your cereal box. But it may be easier to follow the guide below. Here are some other ways to keep portions reasonable:

Use Grandma's china. Her plates are probably smaller than yours. That makes a little food look like a lot, and research suggests that eating on small plates helps people eat less.

Eat mindfully. Take time to enjoy the taste and texture of food—and the experience of feeling full.

Avoid distractions. You're more likely

to notice how much you eat if you don't multitask. So avoid eating while driving, reading, or watching TV.

Follow the 80 percent rule. Stop eating before you feel completely full. That strategy is reportedly common on the Japanese island of Okinawa, which has one of the highest concentrations of people living to 100 in the world.

Write it down. Keep a journal for a few days detailing everything you eat, including late-night snacks and visits to the office candy dish. The list can help identify where you can cut back.

EAT LESS WHEN EATING OUT

Use these strategies to limit the damage of oversized restaurant meals:

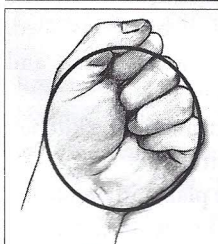
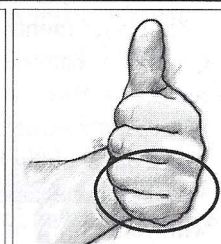
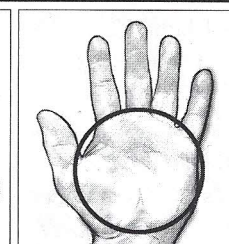
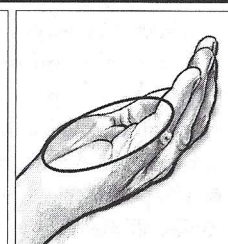
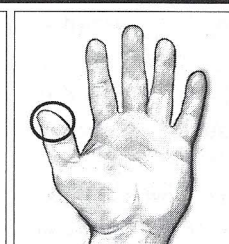
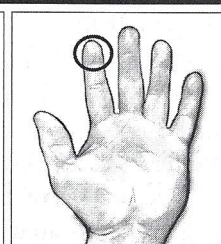
Get just an appetizer or two. Or share the entrée.

Doggy bag it. Bring half home for a meal or two to enjoy another day. Get the extra food wrapped up early so there's less temptation.

Avoid "value" meals. You may get more food but the extra calories, saturated fat, and sodium will probably hurt your heart and waist more than help your wallet.

Order water. Americans' average caloric intake has risen nearly 15 percent in the past 20 years, and about half of the increase comes from sweetened drinks, which are often packed with calories and are easy to overconsume. ■

No measuring cup or spoon? Use this handy guide to serving sizes

					
One cup 1 serving of ● cereal ● milk or yogurt ● raw, leafy vegetables ● soup	One-half cup 1 serving of ● cooked beans, pasta, or rice ● fruit or fruit juice ● most vegetables	Three ounces 1 serving of ● cooked fish, meat, or poultry	One ounce 1 serving of ● cheese ● nuts ● snack foods such as potato chips, pretzels, or tortilla chips	One tablespoon 1 serving of ● jam or jelly ● salad dressing	One teaspoon 1 serving of ● butter or margarine ● oil