

Portion Control: A Key to Weight Management

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Americans are eating more calories than ever before. In fact, a study published in 2007 reported that adults eat more than 300 extra calories a day compared to what they ate 20 years ago. Along with this increase in calories, portion sizes have grown larger over the years. Research has shown that people tend to eat more of a food when they are given a bigger portion. The larger portion provides more calories, and those extra calories can lead to weight-related problems such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, type 2 diabetes, problems with bones, joints and breathing, and even depression. Understanding portion control can help you eat the right amount of food to maintain a healthy weight.



What is portion control?



Portion control is understanding how much food your body needs and being able to limit yourself to that amount. An important thing to consider along with

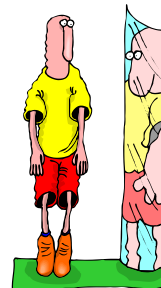
portion control is energy balance, which means making sure you balance the calories you eat with physical activity. Portion control may sound difficult, but it is not. Read on to learn how to control your portions and make sure you are getting the right amount of food.

Portion distortion: how it affects me

Portion distortion is a term used to describe how portion sizes have grown over the last few decades. For example, 20 years ago a "normal" portion of coffee with whole milk and sugar was 8 ounces and about 45 calories. Today, a "normal" portion of coffee with whole milk and flavored syrup is 16 oz and provides about 350 calories! (See more examples of how portions have increased over the years—take the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute's Portion Distortion quiz at <http://hp2010.nhlbi.nih.net/portion/>.)

This trend is seen in all kinds of foods in America: hamburgers are 25% larger; a plate of Mexican food has increased in size by 33%; soft drinks are 52% larger; and a typical bag of chips is 60% larger.

How hungry am I? How much food should I eat so that I am full until my next meal? You ask yourself these questions every day, and whether you realize it or not, portion distortion can affect you every time you eat. Every time you feel hungry and decide how much of a food to eat, you are faced with a portion control decision. Taking time to learn about portion control will make it easier for you to determine if a portion is too large, too small, or just right for your needs and will put you on the right track to controlling your portion sizes.



How much do I need to eat?

The USDA has developed tools to help you identify how much food you should eat from each food group every day. You can determine recommended daily amounts of food based on your sex, height, weight, and activity level, by

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visiting the MyPyramid website at

<http://www.mypyramid.gov>.

Having an idea of how much food you need in a day can help you make better choices about your portion sizes. The website also provides general guidelines for an "average" adult's daily food intake. You can find them listed in Table 1.



Table 1. *Recommended Daily Amounts for Adults

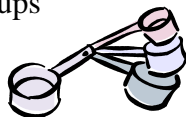
Food Group	Amount
Grains	6 ounces
Vegetables	2 ½ cups
Fruits	2 cups
Milk	3 cups
Meat & Beans	5 ½ ounces
*Based on a 2,000-calorie diet	

Serving equivalent vs. portion size

One of the first steps to controlling portion size is learning the differences between a "serving equivalent" and a "portion size."

What is a serving equivalent?

MyPyramid uses the term "*serving equivalent*" to describe the amount of food recommended from each food group based on your calorie needs. A serving equivalent uses household measures such as "ounces" and "cups" to describe food amounts. For example, the recommended amount of food to eat every day from the Grains and the Meat & Beans groups is listed in ounce equivalents, while the Milk, Fruits, and Vegetables groups use cup equivalents. Serving equivalents are designed to help you meet your body's nutrient needs.



What is portion size?

A *portion size* is the amount of food that you serve yourself at meals and snacks, or the amount that is served to you by someone else. The portion, or amount you eat, is something that you can control.

What counts as a cup or an ounce?

It can be difficult to estimate how many strawberries are in a cup or how much bread is in an ounce. Table 2 lists examples of the amount of foods in a given equivalent.

Table 2. What counts as... ?
...a cup of fruit?

Fruit	Amount
100% fruit juice	1 cup
Apple	½ of a large (3 ¼" diameter) or 1 small (2 ½" diameter)
Banana	1 cup sliced, or 1 large (8"- 9" long)
Strawberries	About 8 large berries

...a cup of vegetables?

Vegetable	Amount
Broccoli	1 cup chopped or florets, or 3 spears (5" long) raw or cooked
Corn	1 cup or 1 large ear (8"- 9" long)
Lettuce	2 cups raw, shredded or chopped
Spinach	1 cup cooked, 2 cups raw

...a cup of milk?

Milk Product	Amount
Milk	1 cup
Cheese	1 ½ ounces hard cheese (<i>like cheddar, Swiss and parmesan</i>)
Yogurt	1 regular container (8 fluid ounces), or 1 cup

...an ounce of grains?

Grain Product	Amount
Bread	1 slice
Biscuits	1 small (2" diameter), (a large, 3" diameter, counts as 2 ounces)
English muffin	½ muffin, (<i>one whole muffin counts as 2 ounces</i>)
Spaghetti	½ cup cooked, or 1 ounce dry
Rice	½ cup brown, wild or enriched white
Popcorn	3 cups popped, (<i>1 microwave bag counts as 4 ounces</i>)

...an ounce of meat or beans?

Meat & Beans	Amount
Meat	1 ounce cooked lean beef
Poultry	1 ounce cooked skinless chicken or turkey
Egg	1 egg
Dry beans and peas	¼ cup of cooked dried beans, or ¼ cup tofu, or 2 tablespoons hummus
Nuts	½ ounce (<i>about 12 almonds, 24 pistachios or 7 walnut halves</i>)



How can I control my portion sizes?

There are many ways you can control your portion sizes. Try some of the ideas listed below whether you're at home or eating out.

- Go ahead and spoil your dinner! If you are hungry before a meal, then eat. Choose a snack that is healthy, like fruit or cheese and crackers. Doing so will help keep you from overeating during your next meal.
- Try starting meals with a small tossed salad. Not only will you feel more satisfied, you will also get more vegetables into your meal.
- When eating out, place half of your meal in a to-go container right away. That way, you'll only eat half of the portion at that meal and you can save the rest for later.











- It's easy to overeat when your attention is focused on something else, and it's easier to overeat when you're eating directly from a package. At home, be sure to use a bowl or a plate instead of snacking straight from the package, especially if you're eating while watching TV or reading.
- When eating out, try ordering an appetizer instead of an entrée. Better yet, order one entrée and share it with someone else. You might just find that you are full and satisfied at the end of the meal without being overstuffed. On top of that, if you only eat half of the meal, you will only consume half of the calories!
- Visualize your portion size. It can be difficult to "eyeball" the food on your plate and know exactly how many serving equivalents are there. An easy way to do this is to imagine everyday items that are similar in size to a serving equivalent of that food. Some useful tips are listed in the pages that follow.





Summary

Why should you care about portion control? Consuming just 300 calories extra per day can lead to a weight gain of about 30 pounds per year! That increase in weight may not be your only worry, because the more overweight you become the higher your risk of weight-related diseases. Take charge of the amount you eat by controlling your portions. Doing so is a step in the right direction to achieve better health.







Visualize Your Portion Size

Listed below are everyday items that you can use as visual cues to help you determine portions sizes that you serve to yourself or are served to you by others. To see how these amounts compare to general recommendations, see Table 2 under the heading "What counts as a cup or ounce?" A more comprehensive list of the amounts of specific foods that count as cups and ounces is available on the MyPyramid website under each food group division (<http://www.mypyramid.gov/pyramid/index.html>).






Fruits & Vegetables	
Food amount	Compare to
1 medium fruit 	A baseball 
½ cup fresh fruit or vegetable 	½ a baseball 
1 cup of leafy greens 	½ a baseball 
1 baked potato 	A fist 

Milk Products	
Food amount	Compare to
½ cup ice cream 	½ a baseball 
1 ½ ounces low fat/fat free cheese 	4 stacked dice 

Grain Products

Food amount	Compare to
½ cup rice, pasta or potato 	½ a baseball 
1 piece of cornbread 	2 stacked decks of cards 
1 cup of cereal 	A fist 

Meat & Beans

Food amount	Compare to
3 ounces of meat, beans or poultry 	A deck of cards 
3 ounces of grilled or baked fish 	A checkbook 
2 tablespoons of peanut butter 	A ping pong ball 