

Healthy Portion Sizes

Did you know that in the 1980s, a typical bagel had 140 calories and a 3-inch diameter? These days, a bagel averages 6 inches – and a whopping 350 calories! With 64-ounce fountain drinks and “mega packs” of snack foods readily available, massive restaurant entrees, and the ability to “up-size” fast food for pennies more, it is easy to get confused about proper portion size.

What is a Portion?

A “portion” can be thought of as the amount of a specific food an individual eats for a meal or snack. Many factors affect food portions, such as the individual’s age, gender, activity level, appetite, and where/when the food is obtained and eaten.

What is the Difference between Portions and Servings?

A portion is the amount of food you choose to eat. There is no “standard” portion size and no single “right” or “wrong” portion size. A serving is a standard amount (issued by the USDA) used to help give advice about how much to eat, or to identify how many calories and

nutrients are in a particular food. This is the information located on the nutritional label of a food product.

For example:

You eat a sandwich with 2 slices of bread.

- The USDA’s Food Guide Pyramid serving slice for bread is 1 slice (www.mypyramid.gov).
- Your portion is 2 slices, which equals 2 servings.

Determining Healthy Portion Sizes

For a general idea of the amount of food you should be consuming, use the following recommendations:

- A serving of meat is about 2 or 3 ounces – about the size of a deck of cards, or the palm of your hand.
- One serving of grains is equal to one slice of bread, one ounce of cereal, or half a cup of pasta or rice.
- A serving of fruit or vegetables is equal to one piece of fresh fruit or vegetable, half a cup of chopped or $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of either juice. In general, however, it’s not as necessary to be vigilant about vegetable and fruit intake, as any amount is healthy – just be aware of the sugar content in fruit.
- The key to any meal is to have three-fourths of your plate covered with vegetables, and one-fourth with meat or pasta.

Assuming a 10-inch dinner plate, the following photos show proper portion sizes:



Break Down Your Meal

It might be easier to figure out how much you are consuming if you actually stop and mentally dissect how much you are about to eat. For example, here is how you would break down a spaghetti dinner:

Spaghetti Noodles –

Your portion: 2 cups
Serving (according to the Food Guide Pyramid): ½ cup
Number of pasta servings: 4

Tomato Sauce –

Your portion: 1 cup
Serving: ½ cup
Number of sauce servings: 2

Meatballs –

Your portion: 6 ounces
Serving: 2-3 ounces
Number of meatball servings: 2-3

Don't forget to calculate any appetizers, drinks, or side dishes you consume with your meal as well; for example:

Garlic Bread –

Your portion: 2 slices
Serving: 1 slice
Number of bread servings: 2

Soft Drink –

Your portion: 24 ounces
Serving: 12 ounces
Number of beverage servings: 2

According to the above, that one meal satisfied the recommended servings of meat for the day, and possibly even grains as well. When taking into account other meals, snacks, and beverages consumed throughout the day, it is easy to see why so many Americans end up overeating.

It's important to follow the Food Guide Pyramid for guidelines on how many servings to consume each day. Your portions do not have to match the standard serving size – they can be smaller or larger. However, the

amount you eat throughout the day should match the total amount of food that is recommended.

Tips for Choosing Sensible Portions

When eating out –

- Choose a “small” or “medium” portion, or if at dinner, see if you can have the “kids” or “lunch” portion.
- If the main dish portions are larger than you want, order an appetizer or side dish instead, or split the main entrée with a friend.
- Never force yourself to keep eating. When you are full, stop. Take the rest home and enjoy it as a meal the next day.
- Stay away from “all-you-can-eat” buffets.

At home –

- Every so often, measure out the typical portion of foods you eat often, using standard measuring cups. This will help you estimate the portion size – and you'll likely be surprised to find out exactly how much you are eating.
- Use a smaller plate for your meal. People tend to eat more out of habit when it's from a bigger plate.
- Put sensible portions on your plate at the beginning of the meal, and don't go back for seconds. Chances are, if you sit back and let your meal digest, you will find you are satisfied in about 10-15 minutes.

Did you know...?

- Children ages 2-6, many inactive women, and some older adults may need about 1,600 calories a day.
- Most children over age 6, teen girls, active women, and many inactive men may need about 2,200 calories a day.
- Teen boys and active men may need about 2,800 calories a day.

