

PORTION CONTROL

ADDRESSING THE OBESITY EPIDEMIC: PORTION SIZE MATTERS

The Obesity Epidemic

Despite increased awareness, obesity rates in the United States remain high. In some communities, these rates continue to rise. In Los Angeles County, for instance, the prevalence of adult obesity increased from 13.6% in 1997 to 23.6% in 2011.¹ The prevalence of child obesity rose from 18.9% in 1999 to 22.6% in 2010.² These trends confirm the magnitude of the obesity epidemic and support the public health urgency to address it.¹⁻³ Obesity (defined as a body mass index (BMI) ≥ 30) is the major preventable cause of type 2 diabetes and an important risk factor for costly chronic conditions such as heart disease, stroke, arthritis and several forms of cancer.¹ It is often attributed to excess caloric intake. On average, Americans eat about 300 more calories of food per day and drink 200 more calories of beverages per day than they did 30 years ago.³ The balance of caloric intake versus caloric expenditure over time plays a critical role, suggesting that simple actions such as decreasing portion size can make a difference in tipping the scales on the obesity epidemic.^{1,2,4,5}

Portion versus Serving Size

The terms "portion" and "serving size" are often used interchangeably.⁵ However, it is important to make a distinction between the two because a single portion may often amount to several servings. A serving is a specified measurement of food. Servings are often measured in cups, grams, or fluid ounces. Dietary recommendations from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration are generally calculated using servings as the reference metric.^{4,5} In contrast, the term "portion" refers to the amount of a single food that is served or consumed at a single eating occasion. Many pre-packaged foods, though they appear to be a single item, actually count as two or more "servings."

Today's Food Environments

Today's food environments in the U.S. encourage increased consumption of food relative to previous decades.⁶ Since the 1970's, portion sizes for adults and children have steadily increased for home-cooked meals, restaurant and fast-food meals, and prepackaged foods.⁷ For example, over a period of two decades, soft drinks served in fast food restaurants have increased in size by 62% and those served in the home have increased by 39%. Similar trends are seen in other foods such as cheeseburgers, which have increased in size by over 20% in the retail food environment and when prepared in the home.⁷

Confidence in Controlling Food Portion Sizes

Among low-income adults recruited for the 2011 Los Angeles County health and nutrition examination survey:*

- › **34%** of the survey respondents reported that they are not confident in their ability to cut down the amount of food they eat at each meal.
- › **40%** of the survey respondents reported that they are not confident in their ability to read serving size information on food labels.

TYPICAL FAST FOOD MEAL: THEN AND NOW¹⁰



FOUNTAIN SODA

1955	2012
7 ounces	32 ounces
4.6 times larger	



FRENCH FRIES

1955	2012
2.4 ounces	5.4 ounces
2.3 times larger	



HAMBURGER

1955	2012
1 patty	2 patties
1.6 ounces	8 ounces
5 times larger	

KEY FACTS

- › Portion sizes have increased significantly over the past three decades.
- › On average, Americans eat about 300 more calories of food per day and drink 200 more calories of beverages per day than they did 30 years ago.
- › 34% of low-income adults reported that they are not confident in their ability to cut down the amount of food they eat at each meal.

*57% of the survey respondents were women, 40% identified themselves as Black, and 34% as Latino. At least one-third were found to have prehypertension and 68% were overweight or obese based on measured height and weight.

The Need for System-Level Strategies to Complement Public Awareness

Adults and children who consume more at one meal do not necessarily eat less at subsequent meals, thus increasing the total calories consumed over time.⁸ For this reason, effective prevention of overeating may require approaches that complement public education — e.g., how food is presented at a cafeteria or restaurant, size of plates used, size of total package, halving of restaurant meals (‘save half for later’ or smaller serving at a reduced price), etc.^{6,7}

What Individuals Can Do

- › If you know you’re going out, **look at the menu online ahead of time or check out the menu board** so you can make healthy choices.
- › Start with a cup of **soup or small salad**.
- › Ask about **half portions** when dining out.
- › If you get a full entrée, **box up half** before you start eating.
- › **Dish up single portions**. To minimize the temptation of second and third helpings when eating at home, dish up single portions on individual plates.
- › **Downsize to 10-inch plates, or use a salad plate**. Shrinking your plate to 10 inches — versus a 12-inch or larger plate — can help you eat smaller portions.

Ways to Create Healthier Food Environments in Communities

- › Encourage food service providers to offer **healthier food options in schools and public facilities**.
- › **Encourage and establish incentives for restaurants** to offer healthier and smaller portion options (e.g., streamlined permitting, reduced fees and public recognition).
- › **Establish incentives to encourage supermarkets, grocery stores, and other food stores** to increase shelf space for and promotion of healthy food and beverages.

CHOOSE HEALTH LA is a local initiative to prevent and control chronic disease in Los Angeles County. This initiative is a planned 5-year grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ (HHS’s) Community Transformation Grants (CTG) program.⁹ Choose Health LA is working with community partners to develop innovative strategies aimed at reducing youth access to tobacco products and exposure to secondhand smoke; improving nutrition and opportunities for physical activity; and increasing access to high quality, clinical preventive services.

SOURCES

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