

## Portion Distortion: What is a “Serving” of Food?

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Americans' love affair with enormous portions is expanding as fast as their wastelines. Consider that the average size of a bagel has nearly doubled since the 1980s, that most convenience stores boast a drink container that holds a whopping 64 oz of fluid, and that moviegoers could lose a small child in the bag of popcorn they buy.

Restaurant portions, too, have crept up steadily for years, heaping more food onto their plates than ever before. Many fast food chains offer “value meals” where it is more economical to pay less for more food, and the standard dinner plate used in most restaurants has increased from 10 to 12 inches. The result? Americans are eating bigger portions and are consuming more calories in the process. According to the US Department of Agriculture, the average American diet has increased from 1,854 calories to 2,002 calories in the last 2 decades (source: American Institute for Cancer Research).

When was the last time you looked at the portions you ate? Most Americans score poorly when asked to define serving sizes for common foods. In addition, many people confuse a portion with a serving, estimating their food intake to be smaller than it actually is. A serving size is a unit of measure of a particular food, and is used to provide nutrient information like calories, fat and cholesterol. Food labels provide nutrition information based on serving size, and the Food Guide Pyramid recommends the number of servings that should be had from each food group for a healthy diet.

A portion, in contrast, is the amount of food that an individual actually consumes, which can be more or less than the serving size. For example, an elderly woman may only eat ½ cup of oatmeal in the morning (one serving), while her grandson may eat two cups of the same oatmeal (4 servings). Although they both have 1 bowl of oatmeal, their portions and serving sizes are different.

Below is a chart explaining the serving sizes of each of the food groups, along with an estimate of what that portion size looks like. You can also visit the USDA or American Dietetic Association websites to get a copy of all of the serving sizes of the Food Guide Pyramid.



Experts suggest that Americans spend a day or two measuring food portions they commonly eat. This will not only give people better practice at eyeballing serving sizes, but will also indicate whether they are eating an appropriate amount of food to meet their weight goals.

If you find that you are eating more than you thought, try measuring out your food for a few days so that you can “reprogram” yourself as to what constitutes a healthy portion for you. In addition, you may want to follow these tips:

- Avoid eating directly out of the bag or carton.
- Plate your food in the kitchen rather than serving it “family style” at the table.
- After eating your portion, wait 10 minutes before taking seconds. This is how long it takes your brain to recognize that you are full.
- When eating a meal in a restaurant, determine your proper portion and ask for a doggie bag for the rest.
- Split dessert.

### What's in a Serving?

- \* 1 fruit serving = ½ cup canned or 1 medium fruit (about the size of a tennis ball)
- \* 1 meat, poultry or fish serving = 3 oz (about the size of a deck of cards)
- \* 1 dairy serving = 8 oz, (the size of a container of individual yogurt)
- \* 1 grain = 1 slice bread, presliced (about the size of a cassette tape),  
or 1/2 cup pasta (about the size of an adult woman's palm, stacked 1" high)
- \* 1 vegetable serving = 1/2 cup cooked or canned vegetables (about ½ a baseball)
- \* 1 fat serving = 1 teaspoon (about the size of 4 stacked dimes)