

WIN

Weight-control Information Network

**Just
Enough
For You**

About Food Portions



U.S. Department of Health
and Human Services
National Institutes of Health

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Introduction

Controlling your weight calls for more than just choosing a healthy variety of foods. It also calls for looking at **how much** and **how often** you eat. This brochure shows you how to use serving sizes to help you eat just enough for you.



What is the difference between a portion and a serving?

A “portion” is how much food you choose to eat at one time, whether in a restaurant, from a package, or in your own kitchen. A “serving” size is the amount of food listed on a product’s Nutrition Facts. Sometimes, the portion size and serving size match; sometimes they do not. Keep in mind that the serving size on the Nutrition Facts is not a recommended amount of food to eat. It is a quick way of letting you know the calories and nutrients in a certain amount of food.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Nutrition Facts information is printed on most packaged foods. It tells you how many calories and how much fat, carbohydrate, sodium, and other nutrients are available in one serving of food. Most packaged foods contain more than a single serving. The serving sizes that appear on food labels are based on FDA-established lists of foods. (For more information, see <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov>.)



How do I know how big my portions are?



The portion size that you are used to eating may be equal to two or three standard servings. Take a look at the Nutrition Facts for macaroni and cheese. The serving size is 1 cup, but the package actually has 2 cups of this food product. If you eat the entire package, you are

eating two servings of macaroni and cheese—and double the calories, fat, and other nutrients in a standard serving.

Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size 1 cup (228g)	
Servings Per Container 2	
Amount Per Serving	
Calories 250	Calories from Fat 110
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 12g	18%
Saturated Fat 3g	15%
<i>Trans</i> Fat 3g	
Cholesterol 30mg	10%
Sodium 470mg	20%
Total Carbohydrate 31g	10%
Dietary Fiber 0g	0%
Sugars 5g	
Protein 5g	
Vitamin A 4%	● Vitamin C 2%
Calcium 20%	● Iron 4%
*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your Daily Values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs:	
	Calories: 2,000 2,500
Total Fat	Less than 65g 80g
Sat Fat	Less than 20g 25g
Cholesterol	Less than 300mg 300mg
Sodium	Less than 2,400mg 2,400mg
Total Carbohydrate	30g 375g
Dietary Fiber	25g 30g

Nutrition Facts

To see how many servings a package has, check the “servings per container” listed on its Nutrition Facts. You may be surprised to find that small containers often have more than one serving inside.

Learning to recognize standard serving sizes can help you judge how much you are eating. When cooking for yourself, use measuring cups and spoons

to measure your usual food portions and compare them to standard serving sizes from Nutrition Facts of packaged food products for a week or so. Put the suggested serving size that appears on the label on your plate before you start eating. This will help you see what one standard serving of a food looks like compared to how much you normally eat.

It may also help to compare serving sizes to everyday objects. For example, $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of raisins is about the size of a large egg. Three ounces of meat or poultry is about the size of a deck of cards. See other serving size comparisons below. (Keep in mind that these size comparisons are approximations.)

Serving Sizes

Everyday Objects

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup of cereal = a fist



$\frac{1}{2}$ cup of cooked rice, pasta,
or potato = $\frac{1}{2}$ baseball



1 baked potato = a fist



Serving Sizes

Everyday Objects

1 medium fruit = a baseball



1/2 cup of fresh fruit = 1/2 baseball



1 1/2 ounces of low-fat or fat-free
cheese = 4 stacked dice



1/2 cup of ice cream = 1/2 baseball



2 tablespoons of peanut butter
= a ping-pong ball



Another way to keep track of your portions is to use a food diary. Writing down when, what, how much, where, and why you eat can help you be aware of the amount of food you are eating and the times you tend to eat too much. Page 7 shows what 1 day of a person’s food diary might look like.

After reading the food diary on page 7, you can see that this person chose relatively healthy portion sizes for breakfast and lunch. At those meals, she ate to satisfy her hunger. She had a large chocolate bar in the afternoon for emotional



reasons—boredom, not in response to hunger. **If you tend to eat when you are not hungry, try doing something else, like taking a break to walk around the block or calling a friend, instead of eating. You could also try doing something with your hands, such as knitting, drawing, or playing cards. If the craving hits you while you are at work, try drinking water or herbal tea without sugar.**


By 8 p.m., this person was very hungry and ate large portions of higher-fat, higher-calorie foods. If she had made an early evening snack of fruit and fat-free or low-fat yogurt, she might have been less hungry at 8 p.m. and eaten less. She also may have eaten more than she needed because she was at a social event, and was not paying attention to how much she was eating. **Through your diary, you can become aware of the times and reasons you eat too much, which can help as you try to make different choices in the future.**

Thursday

Time	Food	Amount	Place	Hunger/ Reason	Calories*
8 a.m.	Coffee, black Banana Low-fat yogurt	6 fl. oz. 1 medium 1 cup	Home	Slightly hungry	7 105 205
1 p.m.	Turkey and cheese sandwich on whole-wheat bread with mustard, tomato, and lettuce	3 oz. turkey, 2 oz. American cheese, 2 slices bread	Work	Hungry	373
	Potato chips, baked	1 small bag			108
	Water	16 fl. oz.			–
3 p.m.	Chocolate bar	King Size (4 oz.)	Work	Not hungry/ Bored	560
8 p.m.	Fried potato skins with cheese and bacon	2 skins	Restaurant/ Out with friends	Very hungry	333
	Chicken Caesar salad	2 cups lettuce, 6 oz. chicken, 6 Tbsp. dressing, 3/4 cup croutons			855
	Breadsticks	2 large sticks			296
	Apple pie with vanilla ice cream	1/8 of 9-inch pie, 1 cup ice cream			623
	Soft drink	12 fl. oz.			155

*Approximations based on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's "My Pyramid Tracker," and online dietary and physical activity assessment tool (<http://www.mypyramidtracker.gov/default.htm>).

How can I control portions at home?

 You do not need to measure and count everything you eat for the rest of your life—just do this long enough to recognize typical serving sizes. Try the ideas listed below to help you control portions at home.



- **Take the amount of food that is equal to one serving, according to the Nutrition Facts,** and eat it off a plate instead of eating straight out of a large box or bag.



- **Avoid eating in front of the TV or while busy with other activities.** Pay attention to what you are eating and fully enjoy the smell and taste of your foods.
- **Eat slowly** so your brain can get the message that your stomach is full.

- **To control your intake of the higher-fat, higher-calorie parts of a meal,** take seconds of vegetables and salads instead of meats and desserts.



- **When cooking in large batches, freeze food that you will not serve right away.** This way, you will not be tempted to finish eating the whole batch before the food goes bad. And you will have ready-made food for another day. Freeze leftovers in amounts that you can use for a single serving or for a family meal another day.
- **Try to eat meals at regular intervals.** Skipping meals or leaving large gaps of time between meals may lead you to eat larger amounts of food the next time that you eat.
- **When buying snacks,** go for single-serving prepackaged items and foods that are lower-calorie options.
- **Make snacks count.** Eating many high-calorie snacks throughout the day may lead to weight gain. Replace snacks like chips and soda with snacks such as low-fat or fat-free yogurt, smoothies, fruit, or whole-grain crackers.
- **When you do have a treat** like chips or ice cream, measure out 1/2 cup of ice cream or 1 ounce of chips, as indicated by the Nutrition Facts, eat it slowly, and enjoy it!



Is getting more food for your money always a good value?

Have you noticed that it only costs a few cents more to get larger sizes of fries or soft drinks at restaurants? Getting a larger portion of food for just a little extra



money may seem like a good value, but you end up with more food and calories than you need.

Before you buy your next “value combo,” be sure you are making the best choice for your wallet and your health. If you are with someone else, share the large-size meal. If you are eating alone, skip the special deal and just order what you need.

How can I control portions when eating out?

Research shows that the more often a person eats out, the more body fat he or she has. Try to prepare more meals at home. Eat out and get take-out foods less often. When you do eat away from home, try these tips to help you control portions:

- **Share your meal**, order a half-portion, or order an appetizer as a main meal. Examples of healthier appetizers include tuna or chicken salad, minestrone soup, and tomato or corn salsas.
- **Take at least half of your meal home.** Ask for a portion of your meal to be boxed up so you will not be tempted to eat more than you need.
- **Stop eating when you begin to feel full.** Focus on enjoying the setting and your friends or family for the rest of the meal.
- **Avoid large beverages such as “supersize” sugar-sweetened soft drinks.** They have a large number of calories. Instead, try drinking water with a slice of lemon. If you want to drink soda, choose a calorie-free beverage or a small sugar-sweetened soft drink.



- **When traveling**, pack a small cooler of foods that are hard to find on the road, such as fresh fruit, sliced raw vegetables, and fat-free or low-fat yogurt. Also, pack a few bottles of water instead of sweetened soda or juice. You can also bring dried fruit, nuts, and seeds to snack on. Since these foods



can be high in calories, have small portions ($\frac{1}{4}$ cup) measured out in advance. If you stop at a restaurant, try to choose one that serves a variety of foods such as salads, grilled or steamed entrees, or a plain baked potato. Consider drinking water or low-fat or fat-free milk instead of sugar-sweetened soft drinks with your meal. If you choose a higher fat option like french fries or pizza, order the small size or ask for a single slice of pizza with vegetable toppings such as mushrooms, peppers, etc.

Remember...

The amount of calories you eat affects your weight and health. In addition to selecting a healthy variety of foods, look at the size of the portions you eat. Choosing nutritious foods and keeping portion sizes sensible may help you reach and stay at a healthy weight.



Additional Reading

Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). <http://www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines>. DHHS Publication No. HHS–ODPHP–2005–01–DGA–A. January 2005.

Finding Your Way to a Healthier You: Based on the “Dietary Guidelines for Americans.” DHHS and USDA. <http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2005/document/pdf/brochure.pdf>. DHHS Publication No. HHS–ODPHP–2005–01–DGA–B. 2005.

Guidance on How to Understand and Use the Nutrition Facts Panel on Food Labels. U.S. Food and Drug Administration Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition. <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/foodlab.html>. Updated November 2004.

My Pyramid Food Guidance System. USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. <http://www.mypyramid.gov>.

Portion Distortion II Interactive Quiz. National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. <http://hin.nhlbi.nih.gov/portion/index.htm>. 2004.

Weight-control Information Network Brochures

Active at Any Size. National Institutes of Health (NIH) Publication No. 04–4352. April 2004.

Better Health and You: Tips for Adults. Part of the series *Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Across Your Lifespan.* NIH Publication No. 04–4992. Updated March 2006.

Walking...A Step in the Right Direction. NIH Publication No. 04–4155. August 2004. Available in English and Spanish.

To request a free brochure, call the Weight-control Information Network at 1–877–946–4627 or log onto <http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov>.

Weight-control Information Network

1 WIN Way

Bethesda, MD 20892-3665

Phone: (202) 828-1025

Toll-free number: 1-877-946-4627

FAX: (202) 828-1028

Email: win@info.niddk.nih.gov

Internet: <http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov>

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