

How to ‘de-supersize’ your meals

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Oversized food portions are so common in the United States that what once seemed like a megaportion now looks normal to us. At many fast food and family-style restaurants, a portion equals two to eight standard-size servings. Fast-food chains offer portions that are two to five times larger than those originally introduced. Portions served in the home are increasing as well.

AT THE RECENT American Institute for Cancer Research conference, Dr. Barbara Rolls of the Pennsylvania State University discussed results of her research that show people consume 16 to 56 percent more calories when given larger portions. Many people don't even notice the change.

Many of us simply need to learn to eat less food. But studies show that when people feel deprived and restricted, they often rebel or start obsessing over food. We have to find ways to eat what our bodies need without letting over-abundant portions trick us into consuming too much.

Getting used to seeing smaller portions should help. At home, serve yourself a quarter less of everything than usual. Emphasize to yourself that this amount is not the limit, but a starter portion. You can have more if you are hungry. When you eat out, order only a “small” — whether it's a drink, a meat portion or ice cream. This size will probably provide plenty.

Other ways to control portion size include purchasing small-size bags of snacks or pouring a small amount into a bowl. Starting a meal with salad or broth-based soup should also make it easier for small portions of other foods to satisfy you.

HIGH-CALORIE MEGAPORTIONS

The real problem we face, however, is not excessive portions of all foods. It's excessive portions of foods high in calories. Most of us eat too few vegetables and fruits that are low in calories and high in nutrients.

To shift the proportion of different foods in our diet, use AICR's New American Plate program as a guide. AICR advises that at least two-thirds of our plate should be made up of plant foods (vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans). If we make a substantial part of that vegetables and fruits, we're satisfying our hunger with the lowest calorie foods.

For many people, the key to balance and portion control may be to first serve a substantial portion of vegetables and fruit — maybe double their usual amount — and then serve other foods in smaller-than-usual portions. To satisfy hunger for several hours, we need protein in a meal (from meat, dairy or plant sources like

beans), but there's no reason to make it the star.

AVOID DISTRACTIONS WHILE EATING

Some behavior change programs have shown that when people eat without television or other distractions, really savoring their food, they are satisfied with smaller portions. Adding music or candles may help some people eat more slowly and consume smaller amounts.

For many people, efforts to normalize portions need to deal with the emotional reasons we overeat. For people who use larger or second portions to reward themselves or others, non-food-related rewards need to be developed. After all, the dangers of overeating are anything but rewarding.

Our supersize portions are supersizing our bodies, and our health is suffering as a result. But a restrictive diet is not a long-term answer. We have to revamp our mindset to recognize a "normal" portion.

The AICR brochure called "The New American Plate" shows a simple way to adjust portion sizes while making healthy, delicious, filling meals. You can read it online, or order a free copy for yourself, at www.aicr.org.

Nutrition Notes is provided by the American Institute for Cancer Research in Washington, D.C.