

A white plate is centered on a green background with white polka dots. The plate contains the text 'An Essential Guide to Portion Size'. A hand on the left holds a silver fork, and a hand on the right holds a silver knife, both positioned as if about to eat from the plate.

An Essential Guide to Portion Size

Portion size is a topical issue, and ‘portion distortion’ has been accused of contributing to the rising levels of being overweight and obesity in the UK. But, have portions got bigger and how do we know what a portion is? **Angie Jefferson** has some everyday tips to help you make sure your portion size is right for you

WHY DOES PORTION SIZE MATTER?

We're all human and when we're offered foods, especially those that we find delicious and enjoyable, we tend to take a bigger portion... and then eat it! While this might be a good thing for fruit and vegetables, this inescapable human trait is not so good when it comes to higher calorie or more indulgent foods, where a larger portion means more calories, sugar and/or fat.

WHAT IS A PORTION?

A portion is an amount or serving of a food or drink that is for one person. Here lies the first challenge - all of us are different in terms of size, shape and metabolic rate and so we all need a different portion of any particular food. There isn't a single perfect portion size but there are some general rules:

- Children generally need smaller portions
- Teenagers, when growing rapidly, can suddenly need larger portions (and many out-eat their parents!)
- Women usually need smaller portions compared to men as men have a higher metabolic rate
- As we get older portion size can become smaller, in part due to becoming less active.

While children and teenagers may get suddenly hungry and need to eat more



Portion sizes are thought to have increased in recent decades

A portion is an amount of food served to one person

during growth spurts, it's important to allow them to drop their portion size down again once growth has slowed.

WHAT DO PORTIONS ON FOOD PACKAGING MEAN?

Portion sizes on a food label are useful to provide information on how many portions are in a product and helps guide you on how much to buy for your household. Packaged food often provides

a guide to the nutritional content of a portion of that food, such as the number of calories and the amount of fibre or fat.

So who decides on what a portion of any food is? While it's easy to assume that food companies just make up portion sizes, most of the time portion sizes are in fact now standard across many different food types.

Historically, portion sizes were based on the actual

weights of what people were eating and that was recorded in national dietary surveys. However, portion sizes are thought to have increased in recent decades and so this is no longer the best approach. In the UK and across Europe, companies producing similar types of foods have worked together to agree on standard food portion sizes. These are based on how much of a food people usually eat at one time, and, importantly, on what portion size is fitting with dietary recommendations. These standard portion sizes have to be agreed to be both realistic and reasonable.

One specific example are breakfast cereals where portion size is based on the volume poured out into a bowl - lighter flaked or puffed cereals have a portion size of 30g, whereas the same

amount of a denser, heavier cereal such as muesli has a 45g portion size.¹

Agreeing on a standard portion size is important for food companies so that they can provide accurate nutrition information and we can compare between different brands. This is also vital for fortified foods which have added vitamins and minerals. Food companies need to know that people will eat a 'usual portion' of that food so that vitamins and minerals can be added at levels that are enough to make a useful difference to nutrient intakes.

HAVE PORTION SIZES GOT BIGGER?

This is a really hard question to answer as research from both the UK and Ireland suggests that not all food portions have got bigger and the answer depends on the individual food in question.^{2,3} Most foods that are commonly eaten at home appear to be relatively unchanged in terms

of portion sizes compared to previous years. Exceptions include ready meals and white bread where portions appear to have increased.

When it comes to eating outside of the house or ready-prepared foods, 'portion distortion' is a term that has been used to describe the fact that portion sizes for some foods have got bigger in recent decades and that this 'larger portion' size has become normal.

PORTION DISTORTION

- An upward shift in the size and calorie content of a serving of a particular food

In 2013, the British Heart Foundation reviewed the portion size of 145 everyday foods and compared these to portion sizes eaten in 1993.⁴ Similar to other research, the results showed variations between food type, and also between brands. For some brands, portion size had increased and for other's it was

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smaller. The report gave some specific and startling examples, for instance, individual chicken pies and meat lasagne ready meals have increased in size by around 40%. The report also revealed that a portion of plain sweetmeal biscuits has increased in size by 17%. It means if you were to eat one biscuit daily now, compared to 1993, you'd be adding 3,330 calories to your diet each year. Eat two every day and you are adding almost 7000 calories. Little wonder that we are finding it harder to control our body weight.

PAY ATTENTION TO PORTION SIZE

What is clear is that we need to pay more attention to the portion sizes of the foods and drinks that we're devouring. A range of studies have been carried out looking at what affects how much we eat or drink - some is common sense but some is surprising.^{5,6,7}

TIPS TO CONTROL PORTION SIZE

➤ NOT SURE WHAT A PORTION SIZE SHOULD BE?

Try our handy guide on page 66 for size.

➤ **READ FOOD LABELS.** How many servings are in the pack? How many does it serve in your house?

➤ **SLOW DOWN WHEN EATING.** Focus on the food and enjoy the smell, the taste and the texture.

➤ **REPACKAGE SUPERSIZE BAGS.** Large bags of crisps or sharing chocolate bars may be cheaper, but encourage over eating. Check portion size and re-package into smaller containers.

➤ **STOP EATING WHEN YOU ARE FULL.** Many of us were raised to clear our plates and not waste food, so serve smaller portions or try and abandon this habit.

➤ **EATING OUT - SHARE A MEAL.** Order starters to share rather than one each. Don't be afraid to order one dessert and some extra forks. Four people can enjoy a few bites of a decadent dessert and it's probably just the right amount!

➤ **USE A SMALLER PLATE.** Serve your meals on smaller plates. Your plate will look full, but you'll be eating less.

WHAT ENCOURAGES US TO EAT MORE?

- Larger food packets
- Bigger restaurant portions
- Larger size plates and bowls
- on trend, but they make

portions look smaller than they actually are

- Distractions such as TV or computer games while eating
- Food labelled as low fat or low energy. 'Low' seems to result in 'don't worry - eat more'

Paying attention to how we eat (sometimes called 'mindful eating'), and opting for smaller plates and servings of food, is important to avoid unintentionally eating more than we need. In fact, deciding to choose smaller food



HANDY GUIDE TO PORTION SIZES

Some foods such as a slice of bread or an apple or pear come ready portioned, but others are harder to judge. Here is our easy guide – there's no need for scales or weighing.

Your hand is a great guide to correct portions sizes. Bigger hands need bigger portions, small hands need small portions

CHEESE	Two fingers	
MILK/YOGHURT	A fist size	
COOKED VEGETABLES	A handful	
SALAD	2 handfuls	
BERRY FRUITS	A handful	
DRY CEREAL	A handful	
RICE OR PASTA	A handful	
BEEF, CHICKEN OR FISH	Palm of your hand	
NUTS	Palm of your hand	

portions, smaller food packs and smaller plate and bowl sizes could reduce energy intake by around 250 calories a day for adults and around 95 calories a day for children.⁸ Making a conscious choice to watch portion size could be the boost to weight control that you need.

PARENTS BEWARE:

When parents serve themselves larger portions their children follow suit and eat larger portions as well.⁹ Watching your portion size could have a knock on effect on how the whole family eats.

AUTHOR BIO

Since qualifying as a Registered Dietitian, Angie Jefferson BSc (Hons) RD, RPHNtr has researched, written and discussed with consumers and health professionals almost every aspect of diet and health. Her overriding aim is to deliver simple positive messages for optimal nutrition within a healthy lifestyle.



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