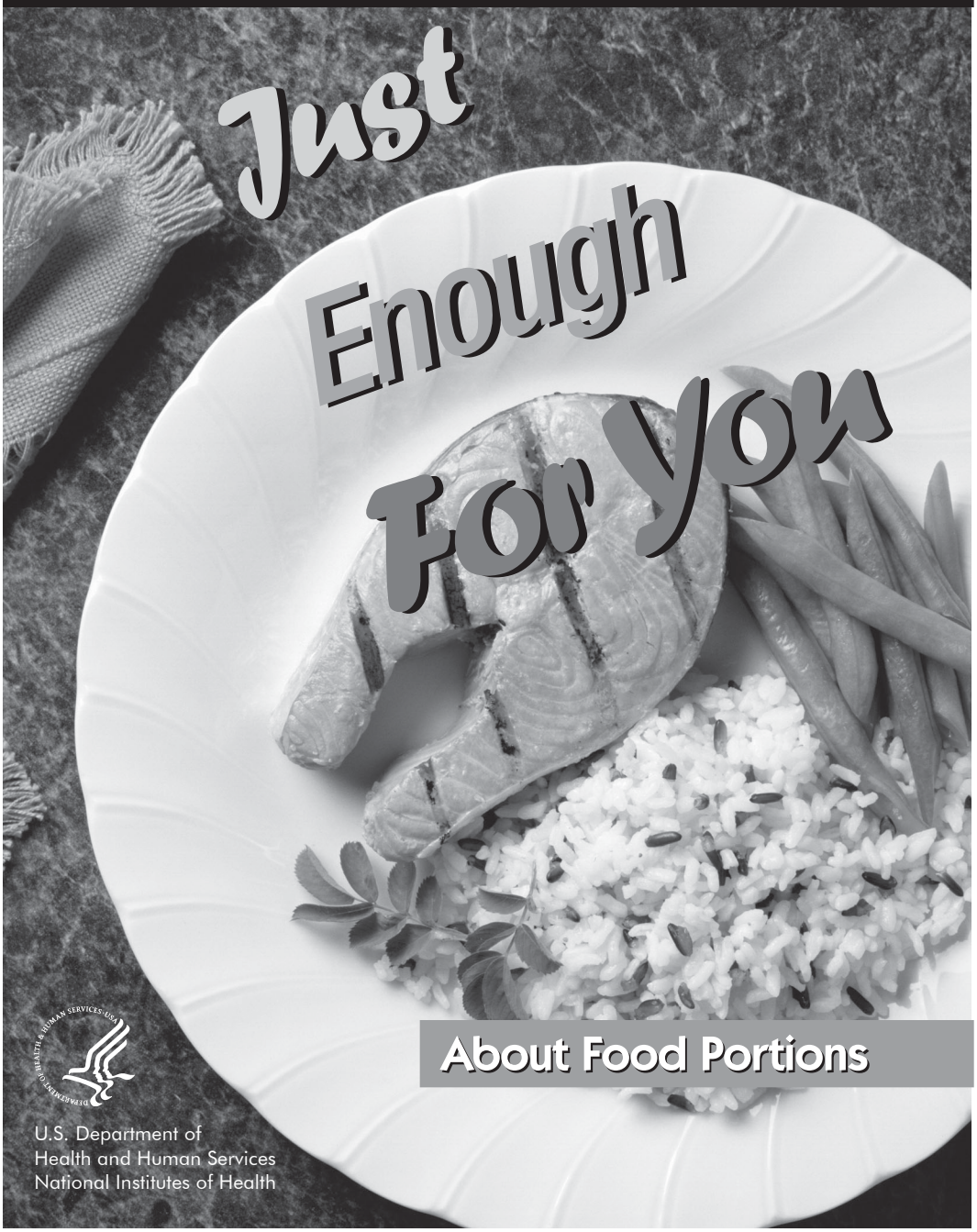
WIN

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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Just Enough For You

About Food Portions

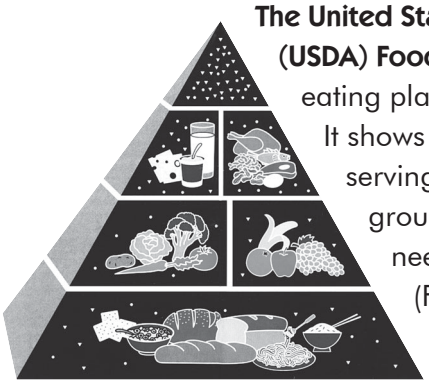
Have you noticed that the size of muffins, candy bars, and soft drinks has grown over the years? How about portions of restaurant foods like pasta dishes, steaks, and french fries? As portion sizes grow, people tend to eat more—often more than they need to stay healthy.

Larger food portions have more calories. Eating more calories than you need may lead to weight gain. Too much weight gain can put you at risk for weight-related diseases like type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and some cancers.

Managing your weight calls for more than just choosing a healthful variety of foods like vegetables, fruits, grains (especially whole grains), beans, and low-fat meat, poultry, and dairy products. 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's the difference between a portion and a serving?

A "portion" is how much food you choose to eat, whether in a restaurant, from a package, or in your own kitchen. A "serving" is a standard amount set by the U.S. Government, or sometimes by others for recipes, cookbooks, or diet plans. There are two commonly used standards for serving sizes:



The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Guide Pyramid is a healthy eating plan for people ages 2 and over. It shows the recommended number of servings to eat from each of five food groups every day to meet your nutrition needs, and it defines serving sizes. (For more information, see **The Food Guide Pyramid** under Additional Reading on page 11.)

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Nutrition Facts Label is printed on most packaged foods. It tells you how many calories and how much fat, carbohydrate, sodium, and other nutrients are in one serving of the food. The serving size is based on the amount of food people say they usually eat in one sitting. This size is often different than the serving sizes in the Food Guide Pyramid.

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 this Nutrition Facts label for cookies. The serving size is two cookies, but if you eat four cookies, you are eating two servings—and double the calories, fat, and other nutrients in a standard serving.

To see how many servings a package contains, check the "servings per container" listed on the Nutrition Facts label. 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 labels for a week or so. Put the measured food on a 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.

Nutrition Facts

Serving Size 2 cookies (31g)
Servings Per Container About 7

Amount Per Serving	
Calories 110	Calories from Fat 20
	% Daily Value*
Total Fat 2.5g	**4%**
Saturated Fat 0g	**0%**
Polyunsaturated Fat 0g	
Monosaturated Fat 1g	
Cholesterol 0 mg	**0%**
Sodium 115 mg	**5%**
Total Carbohydrate 22g	**7%**
Dietary Fiber 1g	**6%**
Sugars 14g	
Protein 1g	

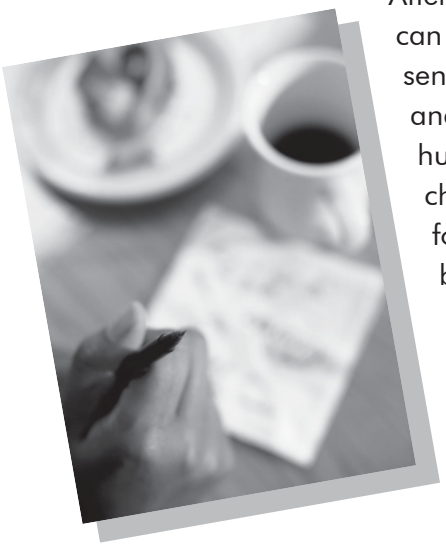
Vitamin A 0%	•	Vitamin C 0%
Calcium 2%	•	Iron 4%

*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		300g	375g
Dietary Fiber		25g	30g

For foods that don't have a Nutrition Facts label, such as ground beef, use a kitchen scale to measure the food in ounces (according to the Food Guide Pyramid, one serving of meat, chicken, turkey, or fish is 2 to 3 ounces).

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 5 shows what 1 day of a person's food diary might look like.



After reading the food diary, you can see that this person chose sensible portion sizes for breakfast and lunch—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 call a friend, instead of eating.**

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 or pretzels, 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, and try to make different choices in the future.**

THURSDAY				
Time	**Food**	**Amount**	**Place**	**Hunger/ Reason**
8am	Coffee, black Banana Low-fat yogurt	6 fl. oz. 1 medium 1 cup	Home	Slightly hungry
1pm	Turkey and cheese sandwich on whole wheat bread with mustard, tomato, and lettuce Potato chips, baked Water	3 oz. turkey, 1 slice American cheese, 2 slices bread 1 small bag, 1/2 oz. 16 fl. oz.	Work	Hungry
3pm	Chocolate bar	King size (4oz.)	Work	Not hungry/ bored
8pm	Fried mozzarella sticks Chicken Caesar Salad Breadsticks Apple pie with vanilla ice cream Soft drink	4 each 2 cups lettuce, 6 oz. chicken, 6 tablespoons dressing, 3/4 cup croutons 2 large 1/8 of 9-inch pie, 1 cup ice cream 12 fl. oz.	Res-taurant	Very hungry/ out with friends

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 long enough to recognize standard serving sizes. Try these other ideas to help you control portions at home:

Take a standard serving out of the package 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.

❖

Take seconds of vegetables or salads instead of higher-fat, higher-calorie parts of a meal such as meats or desserts.

When cooking in large batches, freeze food that you will not serve right away. This way, you won't be tempted to finish eating the whole batch before the food goes bad. And you'll have ready-made food for another day. Freeze in single-meal-sized containers.

❖

Try to eat three sensible meals at regular times throughout the day. Skipping meals may lead you to eat larger portions of high-calorie, high-fat foods at your next meal or snack. Eat breakfast every day.

❖

Keep snacking to a minimum. Eating many snacks throughout the day may lead to weight gain.

❖

When you do have a treat like chips, cookies, or ice cream, eat only one serving, 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 a larger size of fries or soft drink? 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 health **and** your wallet. 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.
- **Take half or more of your meal home.** You can even ask for your half-meal to be boxed up before you begin eating 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" soft drinks. They have a large number of calories. Order the small size, choose a calorie-free beverage, or drink water with a slice of lemon.

❖ **When traveling, bring along nutritious foods** that will not spoil such as fresh fruit, small cans of fruit, peanut butter and jelly (spread both thin) sandwiches, whole grain crackers, carrot sticks, air-popped popcorn, and bottled water. If you stop at a fast food restaurant, choose one that serves salads, or order the small burger with lettuce and tomato. Have water or nonfat milk with your meal instead of a soft drink. If you want french fries, order the small size.

Remember...

The amount of calories you eat affects your weight and health. In addition to selecting a healthful 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

U.S. Department of Agriculture Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. **The Food Guide Pyramid.** Home and Garden Bulletin No. 252. October 1996. Phone 1-888-878-3256. *www.usda.gov/cnpp/pyrabklt.pdf.*

U.S. Department of Agriculture Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. **How Much Are You Eating?** Home and Garden Bulletin No. 267-1. March 2002. Phone 1-888-878-3256. *www.usda.gov/cnpp/Pubs/Brochures/index.htm.*

U.S. Food and Drug Administration Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition. **Guidance on How to Understand and Use the Nutrition Facts Panel on Food Labels.** June 2000. *www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/foodlab.html.*

Weight-control Information Network brochures:

- **Physical Activity and Healthy Eating Across Your Lifespan** (brochures in this series are written for Older Adulthood, Adulthood, Childhood, and Pregnancy)
- **Walking: A Step in the Right Direction**
- **Fit and Fabulous as You Mature, Energize Yourself and Your Family, and Celebrate the Beauty of Youth!** (brochures in this series are written for Black women of different ages)
- **Active at Any Size.**

To request a free brochure, call WIN at 1-877-946-4627 or log on to *www.niddk.nih.gov/health/nutrit/nutrit.htm.*

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The Weight-control Information Network (WIN) is a service of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases of the National Institutes of Health, which is the Federal Government's lead agency responsible for biomedical research on nutrition and obesity. Authorized by Congress (Public Law 103-43), WIN provides the general public, health professionals, the media, and Congress with up-to-date, science-based health information on weight control, obesity, physical activity, and related nutritional issues.

WIN answers inquiries, develops and distributes publications, and works closely with professional and patient organizations and Government agencies to coordinate resources about weight control and related issues.

Publications produced by WIN are reviewed by both NIDDK scientists and outside experts. This publication was also reviewed by Samuel Klein, M.D., Danforth Professor of Medicine and Director, Center for Human Nutrition, Washington University, and Marie-Pierre St-Onge, Ph.D., Post-doctoral Fellow, New York Obesity Research Center, St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital Center.

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This publication is also available at *www.niddk.nih.gov/health/nutrit/nutrit.htm*.

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