

Meal Strategies

Lifestyle changes over the past decade have contributed to the public's misconceptions about food serving sizes. As part of this trend, restaurant and home meal portions have gone from reasonably sized to supersized. The Center for Science in the Public Interest estimates that most restaurant meals contain about 1,000 calories—and that's excluding appetizers and dessert. Tack on an appetizer and a dessert and you've added another 1,000 calories to your waistline.

Whether a meal is consumed at home or at a restaurant, portion sizes *do* matter. Many people do not realize that consuming as few as 100 extra calories a day—the amount found in 10 french fries or one ounce of cheese—can add up to a 10-pound weight gain in a year.

Controlling food portions, however, does not mean forsaking restaurant fare or good home cooking. There are steps you can take, according to Catherine Reade, MS, RD.

The following strategies apply to both fast-food outlets and fine-dining establishments:

1 Start Each Meal With a Big Glass of Water. And ask the waiter for refills of your water glass throughout the meal. Water fills you up without adding any calories (plus it's free).

2 Balance Your Food Budget. If you know you will be having beef steak for dinner, choose light fare for lunch—for example, a turkey sandwich with lettuce, tomato and mustard; carrots; and a fruit salad.

3 Plan Ahead. Choose a restaurant that prepares low-fat fare and preplan your menu choices before you arrive. Or call ahead to make sure the establishment has what you desire.

4 Be an Aggressive Diner. Before ordering, ask how the food selections are prepared and make special requests for low-fat meals.

5 Order the Smallest Size. Even though the biggest meal portions *appear* to give you the best value, resist and opt for the smallest burger or the plain grilled-chicken sandwich.

6 When in Doubt, Order Simple Dishes. Foods like grilled halibut, steamed vegetables and a plain baked potato are all low-fat choices. Consider similar choices when dining out.

7 Order Salad Dressings and Sauces on the Side. Rather than the restaurant's kitchen heaping dressings and sauces on your meal, this strategy lets *you* control the amount of fat you ingest.

8 Avoid the French Fries. Like all fried foods, french fries contain excessive amounts of fat. On rare occasions when you must indulge yourself, order the smallest size.

9 Relish Your Favorite Foods. If you adore crusty bread, go for it, but round out your meal with a salad and fruit cocktail. If you have your heart set on having a large entree, skip the appetizers and the bread and butter.

10 Share an Order or Take Half Home. When your meal arrives, ask for a take-out box and immediately put away half of your meal before you start. Better yet, ask for a half-portion at a reduced rate.

In addition to not replicating the large portions served in restaurants, take the following actions when dining at home, says Reade:

11 Start Meals With a Fruit or Vegetable. These fiber-filled foods will fill you up, leaving less room for more calorie-dense food.

12 Steam Vegetables or Saute Them in Small Amounts of Olive Oil. To keep calories in check, measure a teaspoon or tablespoon of oil to see what it looks like in the pan, since liquid amounts are hard to gauge.

13 Use Smaller Plates. Psychologically, this is a very powerful way to decrease portion sizes without feeling deprived.

14 Check Food Labels for Calorie and Fat Content and Portion Size. When it comes to baked goods, stick to the serving size listed (yes, it will be much smaller than you would like) and put the rest away.

15 Begin Each Day With a Healthy Breakfast. A great way to control portion size is to start with an energizing breakfast filled with whole grains, fruit and low-fat milk. Studies indicate that those who do this consume less fat and fewer calories throughout the day.

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