

Portion Size, Then vs. Now

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Over the past few decades, portion sizes of everything from muffins to sandwiches have grown considerably. Unfortunately, America's waistbands have reacted accordingly. In the 1970s, around 47 percent of Americans were overweight or obese; now 66 percent of us are. In addition, the number of just obese people has doubled, from 15 percent of our population to 30 percent.

While increased sizes haven't been the sole contributor to our obesity epidemic, large quantities of cheap food have distorted our perceptions of what a typical meal is supposed to look like. These portion comparisons, adapted from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute's (NHLBI) Portion Distortion Quiz, give a visual representation of what sizes used to be compared to what they are today.

Two Slices of Pizza



Twenty years ago
500 calories



Today
850 calories

Those extra 350 calories, if eaten a two times a month, would put on two extra pounds a year, or forty pounds in the next two decades.

Cup of Coffee

**Twenty years ago**

Coffee with milk and sugar
milk

8 ounces

45 calories

**Today**

Grande café mocha with whip, 2%

16 ounces

330 calories

When our parents ordered a coffee two decades ago, they weren't given as many size options—a standard cup of joe was eight ounces, the size of a small coffee cup. Nowadays, most of us feel like we don't get our money's worth unless the cup is at least twelve ounces; it's not unusual to see thirty-two ounce coffee cups, four times the size they used to be. When made into a mocha, the morning coffee has as many calories as a full meal.

Movie Popcorn**Twenty Years Ago**

5 cups

270 calories

**Today**

Tub

630 calories

We don't have to eat those extra 360 calories in the tub of popcorn, but that's easier said than (not) done. Studies indicate that when given food in larger containers, people will consume more. In a 1996 Cornell University study, people in a movie theater ate from either medium (120g) or large (240g) buckets of popcorn, then divided into two groups based on whether they liked the taste of the popcorn. The results: people with the large

size ate more than those with the medium size, regardless of how participants rated the taste of the popcorn.

Bagel



Twenty Years Ago

3-inch diameter

140 calories



Today—Noah's Plain Bagel

5-6-inch diameter

350 calories

Because portions are now so large, it's hard to understand what a "serving size" is supposed to be. Today's bagel counts for three servings of bread, but many of us would consider it one serving. Larger sizes at restaurants have also contributed to larger sizes when eating at home. A study comparing eating habits today with twenty years ago found that participants poured themselves about 20 percent more cornflakes and 30 percent more milk than twenty years ago.

Cheeseburgers



Twenty years ago

333 calories



Today's Burger

590 calories

According to a 2007 paper published in the *Journal of Public Health Policy*, portion sizes offered by fast food chains are two to five times larger than when first introduced. When

McDonald's first started in 1955, its only hamburger weighed around 1.6 ounces; now, the largest hamburger patty weighs 8 ounces, an increase of 500 percent. And while a Big Mac used to be considered big, it's on the smaller side of many burger options. At Burger King, you can get the Triple Whopper; at Ruby Tuesday's there's the Colossal Burger; and Carl's Junior has the Western Bacon Six Dollar Burger.

Soda



Original 8-ounce bottle
97 calories



12 ounce can
145 calories



20-ounce bottle
242 calories

While the 12-ounce can used to be the most common soda option, many stores now carry only the 20-ounce plastic bottle, which contains 2.5 servings of soda. When presented with these larger sizes, humans have a hard time regulating our intake or figuring out what a serving size is supposed to be. A 2004 study, published in *Appetite*, gave people potato chips packaged in bags that looked the same, but increased in size. As package size increased, so did consumption; subjects ate up to 37 percent more with the bigger bags. Furthermore, when they ate dinner later that day, they did not reduce their food consumption to compensate for increased snack calories—a recipe for weight gain.

Plates



It's not just food portions that have increased; plate, bowl, and cup sizes have as well. In the early 1990s, the standard size of a dinner plate increased from 10 to 12 inches; cup and bowl sizes also increased. Larger eating containers can influence how much people eat. A study published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* found that when people were given larger bowls and spoons they served themselves larger portions of ice cream and tended to eat the whole portion.

Prices



32 ounces
388 calories
\$0.99

44 ounces
533 calories
\$1.09

64 ounces
776 calories
\$1.19

We Americans love to get the most bang for our buck. When confronted with a 32-ounce drink for 99 cents versus a 44-ounce drink for ten cents more, the decision is easy. You'd have to be a sucker not to go big. But our ability to get the most out of our dollar doesn't always serve us well. Value pricing, which gets us a lot more food or drink for just a little increase in price, makes sense from an economic standpoint, but is sabotage from a health standpoint. A study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that Americans consume around 10 percent more calories than they did in the 1970s. Given no change in physical activity, this equates to around 200 extra calories per day, or 20 pounds a year.

What is normal?

Increased portion sizes give us more calories, encourage us to eat more, distort perceptions of appropriate food quantities, and along with sedentary lifestyles, have contributed to our national bulge. Unless you're trying to gain weight, it might help to reacquaint yourself with serving sizes. The [NHLBI](#) tells us that a serving of meat should

be the size of a deck of cards while one pancake should be the size of a CD. It's unlikely that we'll see a scaling down of food to these sizes anytime soon, so perhaps we should all become familiar with another image: the doggy bag.