Just Enough for You

About Food Portions

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES · USA

NIH National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases

WIN Weight-control Information Network

Contents

Introduction 1

How much should I eat? 2

What is the difference between a serving and a portion? 3

How can I use the Nutrition Facts food label? 4

How can I keep track of how much I am eating? 6

How can I control portions at home? 10

How can I control portions when eating out? 12

How can I control portions when money is tight? 15

Resources 16

Introduction

To control your weight, you need to do more than just choose a healthy mix of foods. You should also look at the kinds of food you eat and how much you eat at a time. This brochure will help you understand how much you need to eat. It also will give you tips on how to control food portions so that you can eat just enough for you.

To control your weight, you should look at the kinds of food you eat and how much you eat at a time.

How much should I eat?

To keep a healthy weight, you need to balance the calories you eat with the calories you burn. People who are more active may burn more calories. Being more active may be a good way to help you offset the calories you eat.

No set number of calories or amount of physical activity will help everyone to lose weight or keep weight off. How many calories you need to eat each day depends on your age, sex, weight, genes, and level of physical activity. For example, a 150-pound woman who burns a lot of calories through intense physical activity several times a week may need to eat more calories than a woman of similar size who is mostly inactive and only goes for a short walk once a week.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides information that outlines the number of calories that a person should consider eating based on a number of factors. Check the Resources section at the end of this brochure for links to more information.

How many calories you need to eat each day depends on your age, sex, weight, genes, and level of physical activity.

What is the difference between a serving and a portion?

A ***serving size*** is the amount of food listed on a product's food label and it varies from product to product. A ***portion*** is how much food you choose to eat at one time, whether in a restaurant, from a package, or at home. Sometimes the serving size and portion size match; sometimes they do not.

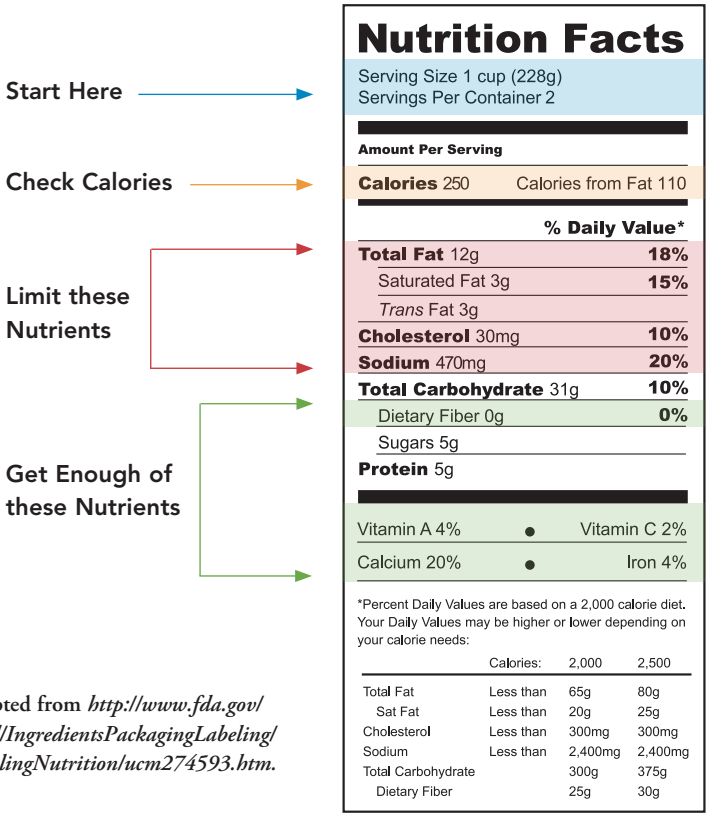
The portion sizes you should eat may or may not be the same as the serving sizes on food labels.

For example, according to a food label, 1 cup of macaroni and cheese is one serving. But if you make yourself a large bowl of macaroni and cheese, that portion is much bigger than one serving. The same may be true if you pour yourself a large bowl of cereal for breakfast. You should be the judge of how the portion you choose to eat relates to the serving size noted on the food label.

How can I use the Nutrition Facts food label?

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Nutrition Facts label (food label) is printed on most packaged foods. The label tells you how many calories and how much fat, protein, sodium (salt), and other nutrients are in one serving of food. Most packaged foods contain more than a single serving.

FIGURE 1. SAMPLE MACARONI AND CHEESE LABEL



Adapted from *http://www.fda.gov/Food/IngredientsPackagingLabeling/LabelingNutrition/ucm274593.htm.*

Keep in mind that the serving size on the food label is not a suggested amount of food to eat. It is just a quick way of letting you know the calories and nutrients in a certain amount of food. The serving size may be more or less than the amount that you should eat, depending on your age, weight, sex, and activity level.

Serving Size and Servings Per Container

Take a look at the food label for a box of macaroni and cheese in Figure 1. To see how many servings a package has, check the "servings per container" listed on the top part of the label.

The serving size is 1 cup, but the package has 2 servings. This means that if you eat the whole package, you need to multiply the number of calories and nutrients by 2 to find out how many calories you are eating. For example, if you eat 2 servings of this product, you are eating 500 calories, as shown below:

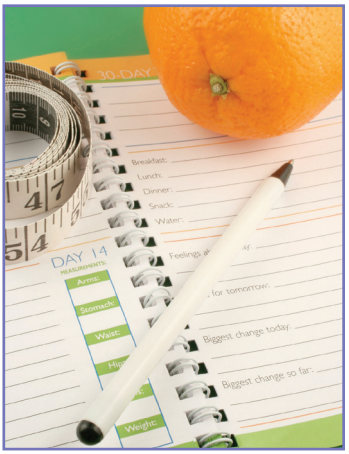
250 calories per serving x 2 servings eaten = 500 calories eaten

Other Helpful Facts on the Label

The food label has other facts about what is in 1 serving of the chosen food. For example, as you can see in the label on page 4, 1 serving of this macaroni and cheese has 3 grams of saturated fat and 3 grams of ***trans*** fat, a type of fat that is unhealthy for your heart. The package includes 2 servings. If you eat the whole package, you will be eating 6 grams of saturated fat (2 servings x 3 grams per serving) and 6 grams of ***trans*** fat (2 servings x 3 grams per serving). Check the FDA listing in the Resources section for the link to more information on how to use the food label to help you eat healthier.

How can I keep track of how much I am eating?

A food diary can be a good way to keep track of how much you are eating. Write down ***when, what, how much, where,*** and ***why*** you eat. This action can help you be aware of how much you are eating and the times you tend to eat too much. You can keep a food diary in a notebook, on your cell phone, or on a computer.



A food diary can be a good way to keep track of how much you are eating.

Figure 2 (see page 8) shows what 1 day of a person's food diary might look like. As shown in the diary, this person chose relatively healthy portion sizes for breakfast and lunch. At those meals, she ate to satisfy her hunger. She had a large chocolate bar in the afternoon for an emotional reason. She ate because she was bored, not because she was hungry.

By 8 p.m., this person was very hungry and ate large portions of food that were high in fat and calories. She was at a social event and did not realize she was eating so much. If she had made an early evening snack of fruit and fat-free or low-fat yogurt, she might have been less hungry at 8 p.m. and eaten less. By the end of the day, she had eaten a total of 3,930 calories, which is more than most people need to eat in a day. Repeatedly eating excess calories over time can cause weight gain.

If, like the woman in the food diary, you eat even when you are not hungry, try doing something else instead of eating:

- Take a break to walk around the block.
- Read a book or magazine or listen to your favorite music.
- Try doing something with your hands, like knitting or playing cards or checkers.
- Try drinking water or herbal tea without sugar or eating a low-fat snack such as an apple if a craving hits you.
- If you are at work, grab a co-worker on the job and go for a quick walk.

Try walking with a friend instead of eating when you are not hungry.

FIGURE 2. EXAMPLE OF A FOOD DIARY

Thursday

Time	Food	Amount	Place	Hunger/ Reason	Calories*
8 a.m.	Coffee, black Banana Low-fat yogurt	6 fl. oz. 1 medium 1 cup	Home	Slightly hungry	2 105 250
1 p.m.	Turkey and cheese sandwich on whole-wheat bread with mustard, tomato, low-fat cheese, and lettuce	3 oz. turkey, 1 slice low-fat cheddar cheese, 2 slices bread	Work	Hungry	363
	Potato chips, baked	1 small bag			150
	Water	16 fl. oz.			–
3 p.m.	Chocolate bar	1 bar (5 oz.)	Work	Not hungry/ Bored	760
8 p.m.	Fried potato skins with cheese and bacon	4 each	Restaurant/ Out with friends	Very hungry	667
	Chicken Caesar salad	2 cups lettuce, 6 oz. chicken, 6 Tbsp. dressing, 3/4 cup croutons			633
	Breadsticks	2 large sticks			226
	Apple pie with vanilla ice cream	1/8 of a 9-inch pie, 1 cup ice cream			638
	Soft drink	12 fl. oz.			136

Total Calories = 3,930

*Estimates are based on the USDA's online tool that measures diet and physical activity (*http://www.choosemyplate.gov*).

Here is a blank version of the diary for you to copy and use.

Time	Food	Amount	Place	Hunger/ Reason	Calories*

Through your diary, you can become aware of the times and reasons you eat less healthy foods or more food than your body needs. This can help as you try to make different choices in the future.

Try to eat meals at regular times without distractions like TV.

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 do this long enough to recognize typical serving sizes. Try the ideas below to help you control portions at home:

- **Take the amount of food that is equal to one serving, according to the food label,** 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, chew your food well, and fully enjoy the smell and taste of your food.
- **Eat slowly** so your brain can get the message when your stomach is full.

- **Try using smaller dishes, bowls, and glasses.** This way, when you fill up your plate or glass, you will be eating and drinking less.
- **Control your intake of higher-fat, higher-calorie parts of a meal.** Take seconds of vegetables and salads (watch the toppings and dressing) instead of desserts and dishes with heavy sauces.
- **When cooking in large batches, freeze food that you will not serve right away.** This way, you will not be tempted to finish eating the whole batch before the food goes bad. And you will have ready-made food for another day. Freeze leftovers in amounts that you can use for a single serving or for a family meal another day.
- **Try to eat meals at regular times.** Skipping meals or leaving large gaps of time between meals may lead you to eat larger amounts of food the next time you eat.
- **When buying snacks,** go for fruit or single-serving prepackaged items and foods that are lower-calorie options. If you buy larger bags or boxes of snacks, divide the items into single-serve packages right away so you won't be tempted to overeat.
- **When you do have a treat like chips or ice cream, measure out only one serving** as shown by the food label. Eat only 1/2 cup of ice cream or 1 ounce of chips, eat them slowly, and enjoy them!

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 takeout foods less often.

Is getting more food for your money always a good value?

Have you noticed that it only costs a few cents more to get larger sizes of fries or soft drinks at restaurants? 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 for your body to stay healthy.

Before you buy your next "value combo," be sure you are making the best choice for your wallet and your health. If you are with someone else, share the large-size meal. If you are eating alone, skip the special deal and just order the smaller (healthier) size.

Try to prepare more meals at home. Eat out and get takeout foods less often.

Order an appetizer such as minestrone soup for a main meal.

When eating out, try these tips to help you control portions:

- **Check the menu** for terms and icons that indicate healthy items, such as low-fat, low-calorie dishes.
- **Share your meal,** order a half-portion, or order an appetizer as a main meal. Examples of healthier appetizers include grilled or steamed seafood, minestrone soup, tomato or corn salsas, and vegetable salads with dressing on the side.
- **Stop eating when you no longer feel hungry.** It may take 15 minutes or longer for your stomach to signal to your brain that you are full. Put down your fork and focus on enjoying the setting and your friends or family for the rest of the meal.
- **Avoid large beverages such as "super size" sugar-sweetened soft drinks.** They have a large number of calories. Instead, try drinking water with a slice of lemon. If you want to drink soda, choose a calorie-free beverage or a small glass of regular soda. Other options are small glasses of slightly sweetened iced tea or lemonade.

On the Road Again?

Tips for Traveling

- **Pack a small cooler of foods** that are hard to find on the road, such as fresh fruit, sliced raw vegetables, and fat-free or low-fat yogurt.
- **Include a few bottles of water** instead of sugar-sweetened soda or juice.
- **Bring dried fruit, nuts, and seeds to snack on.** Since these foods can be high in calories, measure and pack small portions (1/4 cup) in advance.

- If you stop at a restaurant, **try to choose one that serves a variety of foods** such as salads, grilled or steamed entrees, or vegetables.
- **Consider drinking water or low-fat or fat-free milk** instead of sugar-sweetened soft drinks with your meal.
- If you choose a higher-fat option like fries or pizza, **order the small size. Or, you can ask for a single slice of pizza with vegetable toppings** such as mushrooms or peppers.

How can I control portions when money is tight?

Eating better does not have to cost a lot of money. Here are some ways you can keep track of your portions without adding extra costs to your grocery bill:

- **Buy meats in bulk.** When you get home, divide the meat into single-serving packages and freeze for later use.
- **Buy fruits and vegetables when they are in season.** Buy only as much as you will use, so they will not go bad. Check out your local farmers market, as it may be less expensive than a grocery store.
- **Watch your portion sizes.** Try to stick to the serving sizes listed on the food label of prepackaged foods. Doing so can help you get the most out of the money you spend on that food. You can also better control the fat, sugar, sodium, and calories you eat.

Check out your local farmers market for deals on fruits and vegetables.

Remember…

The amount of calories you eat affects your weight and health. In addition to selecting a healthy variety of foods, look at the size of the portions you eat. Choosing healthy foods and keeping portion sizes sensible may help you eat just enough for you.

Resources

Additional Reading from the Weight-control Information Network

Active at Any Size explains the benefits of regular physical activity and describes activities that people who are overweight or obese can enjoy safely (available online at *http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/active.htm*).

Better Health and You: Tips for Adults helps adults plan steps toward consuming healthier foods and beverages and being more physically active. Featuring a tear-off tip sheet perfect for posting on your fridge, this brochure also explains the benefits of getting healthy and the harmful effects of being overweight (available online at *http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/better_health.htm*).

The World Around You provides tips on how to use the world around you, no matter who you are or where you live, to stay healthy and fit (available online at *http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/way.htm*).

Walking…A Step in the Right Direction explains how to start a walking program, presents a sample program, and shows stretches for warming up and cooling down (available online at *http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/walking.htm*).

Additional Resources

2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Offers ideas on different types and amounts of physical activity and how they can benefit you. Available at *http://www.health.gov/PAGuidelines.*

Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2010. HHS and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Contains information and tips on healthy eating, shopping, and cooking. Available at *http://www.health.gov/DietaryGuidelines.*

National Diabetes Education Program. Provides information about diabetes and obesity prevention and control. Visit *http://www.yourdiabetesinfo.org* or phone 1–888–693–6337.

Nutrition.gov. Offers a gateway to reliable information on nutrition, healthy eating, physical activity, and food safety for consumers. Available at *http://www.nutrition.gov.*

U.S. Department of Agriculture. ChooseMyPlate website. USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. Provides many resources on healthy eating, including interactive tools to help you find out how many calories and how much physical activity you need. Available at *http://www.choosemyplate.gov.*

U.S. Food and Drug Administration Website. Offers several resources and tools for using the Nutrition Facts label. Available at *http://www.fda.gov/Food/IngredientsPackagingLabeling/LabelingNutrition/ucm274593.htm.*

Inclusion of resources is for information only and does not imply endorsement by NIDDK or WIN.

Why should I participate in clinical trials?

Clinical trials are research studies involving people. Clinical trials look at safe and effective new ways to prevent, detect, or treat disease. Researchers also use clinical trials to look at other aspects of care, such as improving the quality of life for people with chronic illnesses. To learn more about clinical trials, why they matter, and how to participate, visit the NIH Clinical Research Trials and You website at *http://www.nih.gov/health/clinicaltrials*. For information about current studies, visit *http://www.ClinicalTrials.gov*.

Weight-control Information Network

1 WIN Way
Bethesda, MD 20892–3665
Phone: 202–828–1025
Toll-free number: 1–877–946–4627
Fax: 202–828–1028
Email: *win@info.niddk.nih.gov*
Internet: *http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov*

Like WIN on Facebook:

http://www.facebook.com/win.niddk.nih.gov

The Weight-control Information Network (WIN) is a national information service of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK), part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). WIN provides the general public, health professionals, and the media with science-based, up-to-date, culturally relevant materials and tips. Topics include how to consume healthy foods and beverages, barriers to physical activity, portion control, and eating and physical activity myths. Publications produced by WIN are reviewed by both NIDDK scientists and outside experts. Delia Smith West, Ph.D., of the Fay W. Boozman College of Public Health at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, reviewed the updated version of this publication.

This publication is not copyrighted. WIN encourages users of this brochure to copy and share as many copies as desired. This brochure is also available at *http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov*.

NIH Publication No. 09–5287 • June 2009 • Updated March 2012

For more information from WIN, visit *http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov*

NIH...*Turning Discovery Into Health®*