

Big plates lead to big helpings, study finds

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CAROLYN POIROT, McClatchy Newspapers

Size should matter to the brides of today, at least when it comes to picking out china and silverware .

Smaller bowls and serving spoons -- and probably smaller dinner plates, like you see in antiques shops -- may help prevent overeating and slow down the obesity epidemic, according to a Cornell University study.

For the study, 85 food and nutrition experts were invited to celebrate a colleague's accomplishment at an ice cream social. Guests entered the party room in four groups, and researchers randomly handed out either 17-ounce or 34-ounce bowls and provided 2-ounce or 3-ounce serving scoops. Guests scooped out their own ice cream, then turned a blind corner into a party room, where each was asked to estimate the weight and calories in his bowl of ice cream. Each bowl was weighed.

Most of the participants were dietitians and nutritionists, people who are fairly able to judge calories and serving size, but that didn't keep them from taking more ice cream when they had larger bowls and scoops, said Brian Wansink, a psychologist and professor of marketing at Cornell University.

Four ounces of ice cream in a small bowl may appear to be an appropriate amount, but the same in a larger bowl may appear too little, leading one to overfill the bowl, the study concludes. And, all but three of the partygoers finished all the ice cream they put into their bowls.

"Big dishes and big spoons are big trouble," Wansink says. "They cause us to serve ourselves more because the food looks so small."

In recent years, extra-large portions, especially combination meals "up-sized" by fast-food restaurants, have gotten a big portion of the blame for the obesity epidemic. But nutritionists say most Americans have unrealistic ideas about proper portion sizes, and many people pile on too much food when they serve themselves at home, especially if they use big plates.

Wansink, director of the Food and Brand Lab at Cornell, tells the story of a friend who owns an antiques shop and who has customers who will pick up a plate from the 1940s and ask, "I really like this, but do you have any full-size dinner plates in the same pattern?" Customers also will bring up a small platter and ask, "Are there any more dinner plates that match this one?"

Be a smart snacker.

A lot of people will really make the effort to eat healthy meals, but then they blow it in the evenings when they get hungry for a snack.

- To avoid eating hundreds of calories through snack foods, choose portion-controlled snacks. They allow you to enjoy the foods you like without feeling guilty about overdoing it.
- The 100 calorie packs that are on the shelves these days are also a great option. You can find portion-controlled versions of Wheat Thins, Baked Cheetos and other snacks.
- If you just can't do without a sweet treat now and then, try individually-wrapped ice cream treats. Skinny Cow ice cream sandwiches and ice cream cones are delicious, and each one has only about 150 calories.
- Whatever you do, avoid snacking directly from a big bag of chips or box of cookies while you're watching TV. That's a recipe for disaster!

Re-evaluate your dinnerware.

It's amazing how large our plates, bowls and utensils have become in recent years. They're much larger than those that our parents typically used.

- **Instead of eating meals from dinner plates, use a salad plate instead.** You'll still get the satisfaction of having a full plate of food, but you'll save yourself lots of calories with this one simple trick.
- The same goes for bowls, serving spoons, etc.
- When you sit down for a meal, don't keep the pots and containers of food sitting in front of you on the table. That will prompt you to get seconds. Instead, keep them in the kitchen where they're out of sight.

Beware when you're eating out.

One of the easiest ways to control your calorie intake is to limit the number of meals you eat at restaurants and fast food places. Americans eat out very frequently and also get take-out meals from restaurants more than ever, so you need to be able to manage your eating habits when you're not preparing the food yourself.

- Always ask that the waiter put half of your meal into a take-home container before he even brings it to the table.
- **Serving sizes in restaurants are almost always enormous,** so this is one trick that can be really helpful for keeping your calories under control when eating out.
- Remember that you can always get more food if you're still hungry, but if you dive right into the restaurant-size portion, it's highly likely that you'll overeat.
- Consider ordering an appetizer instead of an entrée. Foods on the appetizer menu are often large enough for several people to share, so they're often a reasonable dinner size for one person.

In another experiment, Wansink found that people who eat an average of nine pieces of candy in one workday -- when the candy is sitting on their desks -- will cut back to four pieces when the candy is moved 6 feet away.

"It's something about awareness and effort -- the little bit of effort it takes to walk over and get a piece that's 6 feet away, and the awareness it takes to decide to consciously walk over and get the candy," he says. The same dynamics will cause candy in a see-through container (even if it has a lid) to disappear more quickly than candy in a milk-glass (i.e., nontransparent) candy bowl with a lid.

For more information on why we overeat, go to www.foodpsychology.org.

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Portion Distortion

Counting calories may not be enough if you're trying to watch your weight. You must also pay attention to how much you're eating, says registered dietician Christine Palumbo. Several recent studies confirm that portion control is key. Research findings published in the June issue of the journal *Psychological Science* showing that people display "unit bias" that causes them to think that a single unit of food is the right amount to eat or drink -- regardless of its size. The study found that people consistently ate more candy when it was served with a bigger serving spoon or in larger packages. Cornell University researchers also found that larger serving utensils and bowls prompted people to eat more food.

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As the obesity epidemic in America continues to grab headlines, nutrition experts are quick to identify "portion distortion" as a potential contributing factor. These new studies confirm their suspicions: Americans need to cut back on portion sizes in order to control their weight, but in a society full of super sized portions, this is often easier said than done.

Portion distortion can impact on your waistline. Christine offers tips to help you cut back on your portion sizes without feeling deprived and hungry all the time.

- It's also important to be careful if you're drinking alcohol with your meal. Not only does that add overall calories just from the alcohol itself, but drinking also lowers your inhibitions and your ability to control your food intake. It's a lot easier to overeat when you've had a few drinks!

Remember that weight loss doesn't have to mean completely changing your diet, Christine says. By watching out for portion distortion, you're taking an important step to controlling your weight.

ABOUT CHRISTINE PALUMBO

Christine Palumbo is a speaker, writer and lifestyle counselor who is a frequent guest on Chicago-area television. She has appeared on such national programs as The Oprah Winfrey Show, Fox News Channel's Fox and Friends and CNN fn's The Flipside. Since 2001, she has written the popular "Food News" column for Allure magazine, and also writes for the highly rated FoodFit.com Web site and Weight Watchers magazine. She is frequently quoted in publications such as Health, Shape, Men's Health, Muscle & Fitness and Cosmopolitan.

In addition to her work with the media, Christine is a sought-after speaker on a variety of health-related topics, such as providing "lunch and learn" seminars to various organizations. In her private practice, she counsels people on issues such as weight management, functional foods, heart disease prevention, and general lifestyle improvement.

Christine also consults for an interesting client mix of corporations, restaurants and not-for-profits. She develops nutrition education materials, performs nutrient analysis for recipes, exhibits at professional meetings, and works on special projects. She presented to her peers twice at the American Dietetic Association's Food & Nutrition Conference & Expo, including in October 2004. Previously she counseled cardiovascular and diabetic patients at the University of Chicago Medical Center.

A graduate of the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Palumbo also holds a Master of Business Administration degree in marketing from DePaul University. She is quite active with the American Dietetic Association, currently serving as a member of their Board of Directors.
