

Portion Control

A Long-Term Strategy for Health

By: Deborah Liv Johnson

The issues surrounding weight gain can be complex, but there are strategies for losing weight slowly and sensibly, with a long-term goal of ongoing weight management and maintenance.

One strategy for weight loss/maintenance is portion control — examining one’s dinner plate size is a good place to begin. During the past 50 years, dinner plates have grown from what we now view as “salad plate” size to “serving platter” size. A 12- or 13- inch dinner plate is common and much larger than the 9-inch plates of the past. However, eating from a full 9-inch plate may feel more satisfying than eating the same amount of food from a larger plate.



According to Mallory Benavides, Dietitian, Eisenhower Medical Center Nutritional Services, portion control is one of the best ways to lose — and maintain — weight. For Benavides’ patients, portion control begins with education.

“When a patient comes in, we talk about their diet,” says Benavides. “I ask them to write down what they eat, how much they eat, and when they eat, over a period of three days. Most people don’t think they eat much throughout the day, so they’re surprised when they see it written down on paper.” Benavides educates her patients about recommended portions, something that is especially helpful when dining out. “Once I show my patients how large a portion should be, I tell them to go home and measure selected foods so they’ll be able to “eyeball” a correct portion without having to measure their food all the time,” she says.

What does a half cup of cooked rice or beans look like? A half cup of chopped vegetables equals the size of a half of a baseball or a rounded handful, while a cup of leafy greens might equal the whole baseball. Practice paying attention to portion size at home and when dining out.

Some people eat the right foods, but in quantities that are too large. Portion control can help these individuals reduce the size of their meals along with their calorie intake.

Benavides emphasizes that carbohydrates are our main source of energy, so it is important to make healthy choices: vegetables, fruits, whole grains, beans, and non-fat dairy products like plain Greek yogurt. “If we deprive ourselves of the good carbohydrates, we’re going to feel sluggish or tired throughout the day which often translates into cravings for sweets and caffeine,” notes Benavides.

“We need the good carbohydrates for energy.”

Using a 9-inch plate, a meal should consist of:

½ plate of vegetables

¼ plate of 3 ounces of meat (fish or chicken) or meat substitute.

Three ounces is about the size of a deck of cards.

¼ plate of starch (potatoes, whole grain rice or pasta)

Daily protein requirement for most healthy people: 5 to 7 ounces

Overly restrictive diets and high expectations can contribute to failed weight loss. According to Benavides, patients have more success thinking in terms of moderation and portion control. “People have different needs, different metabolisms and different habits,” says Benavides. “We like to take an individual approach with each client.”

Tips For Eating Out

Consider sharing a small appetizer or salad, and entrée. Or, when ordering food, ask the server to put one half of the meal into a “take home” container before you are served. You’ll be able to finish your meal without feeling too full.

Share one dessert between a table of four. Everyone gets a bite or two and the extra calorie intake is greatly reduced. For tables of two, share something lighter, like fresh fruit or a small scoop of sorbet.

Include steamed or roasted vegetables as one of your sides, without added butter or sauce.

Skip the bread basket or have just one slice before asking the server to remove the rest.

Potatoes without added fat are a good source of fiber and nutrients. One cup of whole wheat pasta with marinara sauce is another side option.

Ask for fresh lemons to squeeze on salad and vegetables instead of using dressing.

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