

Think



# Size matters

Words: **Paula Hagiefremitis**

*PORTION SIZE IS MORE POWERFUL THAN MOST PEOPLE THINK.  
FIND OUT WHAT YOUR PERFECT PORTION LOOKS LIKE.*

Consider the dinner plate.

It is bigger than a side dish, smaller than a platter, and used for different purposes than its curved cousin: the bowl. Contrary to its name, some might use a dinner plate at lunchtime, or even at breakfast – even though, in Australia and many parts of the world, dinner is assumed to be the main meal and the dinner plate (hence) is the largest plate in a set of crockery. Does that mean we can't use it for our eggs at breakfast or our fruit at supper? No, not really. But it does say something about our expectations of portion sizes.

The size and arrangement of our meals is determined by many things; culture is one of them, as is hunger and, research has shown, even the size of our plates. In recent decades, portion sizes have become the subject of much debate. Whether you're looking at diets that encourage the consumption of six small meals a day, or supersize culture in (but not limited to) fast food chains and supermarkets, or 'fun size' chocolate bars – it can be difficult to assess how much food we need, and where the room lies for what we want, crave and treat ourselves with.

The general consensus is that, today, we are consuming a disproportionately larger amount

of food than the generations before us consumed. But there are many ways that you can eschew 'supersize culture' and regain control of the perfect portion, and that's with a little bit of nutritional and psychological know-how.

## **Determining the right calorie intake**

The simple (yet, frustratingly complicated) fact is that there's not a one-size-fits-all when it comes to how much our daily intake of food should be. Recommended portion guides on food packaging are there to act as a marker of what is appropriate to eat. However, the correct measure for each individual needs to take into consideration age, weight and lifestyle factors before determining a suitable calorie intake.

According to the Australian Health Food Guide, on average, the appropriate calorie intake for Australian women leading a relatively sedentary lifestyle is 1800 per day. For those with a more active lifestyle this increases to 2350 per day. Men, on the other hand, are advised to have an intake of 2400 calories per day versus 3000 for those with a greater amount of mobility in their day-to-day lives. Adjustments to calorie intakes will always be prone to fluctuating changes based on individual needs.

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The above figures are by no means considered the norm for everyone. Averages do not factor the specifics of each person's lifestyle. In this case, the appropriate calorie intake for a person leading a moderately active lifestyle is assuming they're exercising roughly 30 minutes a day. But this doesn't specify what kind of exercise

and how vigorous. Similarly for populations outside the average, it is suggested that calorie intakes should increase for those in the younger age bracket and decrease for those in the 50-plus age bracket, but again, specifics on overall lifestyle habits are not taken into account. The best way to determine whether you're having the correct number of calories is by monitoring your weight.

### So how much is too much?

With portion sizes on the rise, confusion over how much we should be eating is made all the more challenging. While it's not just our food being affected, the size of our crockery has markedly changed as well. Today's average kitchen has standard dinner plates with a 28-centimetre diameter, while in the 1950s it was at 25 centimetres. An increase in crockery sizing alone compromises our concept of what's appropriate to serve, consequently leading to generous serving sizes that inevitably results in consuming bigger portions. Nutritionist Marion Nestle comments in her book *What To Eat*, "It is human nature to eat when presented with food, and to eat more when presented with more food." The concern is that we are being pushed with more food, more often on a daily basis. Ready-made meals have ballooned by as much as 50 per cent and, in America, the average muffin originally weighing in at 85 grams has now increased to 130 grams.

When considering what recommended portion sizes actually look like, the results are (unsurprisingly) modest compared to what we're used to. Nutritionists and dietitians have come up with ways to make it easier for us to ensure we're getting the correct portion size with the right foods. Amanda Clark ([greatideas.net.au](http://greatideas.net.au)), one of the country's leading dietitians, has created one such tool

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called the *Portion Perfection*, a book combined with visual representations of ideal portions and a portion plate and bowl that show you what a meal should look like. While eating off an illustrated plate is something that most of us left behind has a child (and, in case you're wondering, there is a kid-sized version of the portion plate and bowl), according to Clarke it is proving to be an effective tool in familiarising ourselves with normal portion sizes, as well as facilitating weight loss.

For those who want a more generalised understanding, Sian



Porter, consulting dietitian for the British Dietetic Association, suggests reviewing the size of our hands when considering suitable portion sizes. "It's proportional: if you're a bigger person, you'll need a bigger portion. Your hands will be bigger so the portion is adapted automatically. Likewise, children need child-size portions the size of their hands."

To get a rough idea, a serving of meat should be the equivalent to the size of your palm – about 100 grams, not including your fingers. A serving of carbohydrates should be the size of your fist. Fish should be the size of your whole hand. Fruits should be the equivalent of two cupped palms and nuts the size of one cupped palm.

But measuring appropriate sizes alone isn't enough.

Understanding how to eat well comes down to more than just what types of food we're ingesting. It's taking into account the importance of rewiring our current conditioning in order to develop a more harmonious relationship in meeting our bodies' needs.

### The psychology of overeating

The issue of eating too much isn't only about the impact on our health.

It comes down to addressing an even greater problem – the fact we've developed a huge disconnect from our bodies. Psychologist Sarah McMahon of eating disorders treatment clinic Body Matters Australasia says that we are a population suffering from an epidemic of disordered eating. "Many of us do not know whether we should be listening to our heads or our tummies when it comes to making decisions about what, when and how much we should be eating. Many of us do not know when we are hungry or thirsty. Many of us do not know whether



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we are full. Many of us can't stop eating past fullness and are riddled with fear mongering and guilt about this despite the fact that processed foods are created with the specific intention of making us want more.”

From a young age, we intuitively know when we're essentially full. One study from the US reveals that, up until the age of four, children have the ability to stop eating when they've had enough. Research conducted amongst three-year-olds served small, medium and large portions of macaroni cheese found that the same quantity was consumed despite a fluctuation in portion sizes. From about age five, this self-regulation of hunger is lost

and sometimes never recovered, an occurrence that's been observed cross-culturally. The inability to self-control starts from an alarmingly young age, making us easy prey at manipulation from the food industry. Populations with poor nutritional literacy – often the result of socio-economic circumstances and a diet void of wholesome, nutritional food – is just one of the issues concerning our overeating habits. McMahon attests, however, that as much as

our ballooning portion sizes and adverse health effects cannot be overlooked, psychological trauma also needs to be acknowledged as a key contributor to our disordered eating. “Guilt eating is now an emotional experience riddled with ‘oughts’ and ‘shoulds’. Overeating is a very successful tool to distract from guilt and shame about many things, including our relationship with food.”

### **Reconnect with portion size**

McMahon believes the key to correcting our past behaviour patterns and adapting a healthier relationship with food comes down to more than just awareness of portion intake. “Rather than thinking about exercising self-control, we need to think about listening to our bodies again. This usually takes time, practice and self-compassion. We need to start with a recalibration phase where we engage in mechanical eating comprising of regular meals that are nutritionally adequate and satiating. After establishing this framework, we will have more capacity to detect hunger and fullness cues and, as we begin to respond to these and eat mindfully, we can re-establish body trust and a connection with our bodies.”

Often that can include surrendering ourselves to guilt-free temptations in an effort to satisfy cravings, as Clark says, “The best bad food is exactly what you feel like eating – nothing else is likely to hit the spot. The key is to set yourself up for a guilt-free experience by buying just the right portion size, eating it slowly, enjoying every morsel and when it's gone, it's gone. Never buy a whole cake. Go to a coffee shop, order a single slice and enjoy the whole experience – you're unlikely to request a second slice.” Knowing how to balance meeting your needs is a fine line that needs to be applied between good and bad foods. There's no point in withholding from indulging if it's likely to result in overeating during traditional meal times. 