

Tackling Portions – What or How Big is a Serving?

When you come to think of it almost everywhere you look, whether intentionally or unintentionally, you will spot something on health, weight-loss or dieting, be it a “magic” pill or diet programme. A lucrative industry marketed with the aim of providing a ‘quick fix solution’ to weight loss and so-called achievement of positive health. What is it that you actually need to do to attain that sound body or epitome of wellness? There are 4 questions you need to ask yourself when starting a health or weight loss regime i.e.

1. Is the plan nutritionally adequate (including all the food groups)?
- 2: Are there limits on how much you should be consuming?
3. Will you be able to sustain it (i.e. incorporate the meal plan/ lifestyle changes on a long term/lifetime basis)?
4. Does the plan include some kind of physical activity advice?

If you have answered yes to *all* these questions, then by all means go ahead and make that lifestyle change!

Starting a programme is easy, but when it gets down to the nitty gritty detail like how much is one serving of rice or chicken, are you aware of how to quantify it? Not only are better food choices and healthier cooking methods advised but portion control as well. Many a time this aspect is undermined and often overlooked, hence in this article we are going to focus on portion control.

From as early as you can remember, you were probably taught to eat everything on your plate or else you will not get pudding. It is quite common for that habit to follow into adulthood causing you to consume many more calories than are actually required. Over consumption of calories puts one at risk of becoming overweight and this further increases the risk for the development of other chronic lifestyle diseases such as cardiovascular disease, hypertension, high cholesterol and cancer. So this is where portion size comes into play! As a general guideline the following are the minimum daily recommended number of servings for the 5 food categories:

- Carbohydrates: 6 servings
- Protein: 4 Servings
- Dairy: 2 servings
- Fruit and vegetable: 5 in combination
- Fats and oils: 2-3 servings

Bear in mind that these recommendations will vary from one individual to another as one's goal or condition becomes more specific i.e. a sportsman will require more servings of carbohydrates than someone who is less active. Private practicing dieticians usually calculate these requirements for individuals taking certain factors into account like age, gender, weight, height, activity level and medical conditions.

So you might ask, what does a serving of carbohydrate, protein, fat etc amount to? To put this into perspective, one serving is either equivalent to ½ a cup, 1 cup, a matchbox size, a teaspoon or a tablespoon depending on which food category you are looking at. Look at the table below for a simplified explanation of some of the most commonly eaten foods.

Some control tips:

- Initially measure out exact quantities to get a good idea of portion sizes.
- Always empty or decant a product into a bowl or plate as this way you can actually see how much you are consuming.
- Have small nutritious snacks during the day to ensure a good control of your blood sugar level - this will prevent over-eating at your main meals.
- Fill up on free vegetables like lettuce, cucumber, tomatoes, mushrooms and peppers as these are low in calories but high in fibre, adding bulk and thus preventing you from reaching out for that chocolate or piece of cake.
- If you buy snack foods in bulk, e.g. peanuts, then portion these out into smaller amounts. In this way you have more control as opposed to leaving the whole packet in your office drawer.

Whether you are snacking, enjoying a home cooked meal or dining out, the portion size should always be borne in mind - this will ensure that added calories are avoided. The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa recommends following a lifestyle that includes regular physical activity as well as healthy eating practices like

controlling portion sizes, making better food choices (choose Heart Mark approved products) and using healthier cooking methods.

Table: Household measures, for the different food categories, quantifying 1 serving.

Carbohydrates	Protein	Dairy	Fruit and vegetables	Fats and Oils
1 slice of bread ½ cup cooked porridge ½ cup ready to eat cereal ½ cup cooked rice, samp or pasta 3 Provita crackers 2 Ryvita crackers 2 Rice cakes 1 medium potato or 2 baby potatoes ½ bread roll 1 small roti (tortilla) Starchy Vegetables: 1 cup mix vegetables or ½ cup peas or 1 cup cooked butternut or pumpkin Handful of oven baked chips ½ cup mashed potato	Matchbox size of cooked <i>lean</i> meat, ostrich, pork, turkey, chicken or fish ½ cup cooked lean mince ½ cup cooked beans, peas or lentils 1 cooked egg	1 cup low fat/ fat free milk 175ml low fat/ fat free yoghurt Matchbox size low fat cheese 1 cup low fat maas ¼ cup low fat/ fat free cottage cheese	1 medium fruit / tennis ball size ½ cup fruit or vegetable juice ¾ cup fruit salad 1 small banana ½ cup grapes 2 small plums 2 kiwi fruit 3 dates ½ cup cubed fresh fruit 12 cherries 2-4 pieces dried fruit 2 tablespoons raisins ½ cup cooked vegetables 1 cup raw vegetables	1 teaspoon 'regular' tub margarine 2 teaspoons 'light' tub margarine 1 tablespoon reduced fat mayonnaise 2 teaspoons peanut butter 1 teaspoon oil e.g. sunflower or canola ¼ small avocado 2 tablespoons reduced fat dressing 10 olives 1 tablespoon seeds e.g. sunflower or sesame 5 almonds, 10 peanuts or 2 pecan nuts

For more free nutritional advice from registered dieticians call our Heart Mark Diet line on 0860 223 222 or email heart@heartfoundation.co.za.

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