When Size Matters

We live in the land of gigantic food portions. From the enormous bowls of pasta and the big slabs of beef served in restaurants to plate-sized pizza slices and jumbo bags of chips, it’s very common to consume three or four or even five “servings” at a time. Think not? Consider these commonly accepted serving sizes and what they look like.

1 Pasta Serving = 1/3 to 1/2 cup
According to the USDA Dietary Guidelines (and their famous Food Guide Pyramid), a serving of pasta is one-half of a cup. The American Diabetes Association says a serving is one-third of a cup. The visual: A tennis ball sliced in half.

1 Meat, Poultry, or Fish Serving = 2 to 3 ounces
The accepted serving size for this category of food is, generally, three ounces. (The USDA says two to three ounces.) The visual: A deck of cards, or a checkbook.

1 Milk or Yogurt Serving
One cup is the serving size almost always used for all types of milk and yogurt. The visual: A yogurt container, or the size of your fist.

1 Natural Cheese Serving
Natural cheeses are cheddar, provolone, Muenster, Swiss, etc. One serving is equal to 1 1/2 ounces, which might be easier to think of as 3 tablespoons. Processed cheese (cheese food, such as American), for some reason, gets a serving size of two ounces. The visual: 4 dice stacked on top of each other, or the average thumb.

1 Serving of Fruit
With whole fruit, a serving is a medium-sized apple, banana, orange, or pear — keep in mind most of what we see in grocery stores are large to extra-large varieties. If it’s chopped, cooked, or canned, the serving size is one-half cup. The visual: A tennis ball sliced in half.

1 Serving of Grains
If the grains are cooked, like oatmeal, serving size is one-half cup. If it’s cold cereal, a serving is three-fourths to one cup. The visual: For oatmeal, an ice cream scoop; for cold cereal, a teacup to a fist.

*Serving sizes are created for the purpose of giving people healthy and appropriate nutrition information and guidelines. Serving sizes are established so that what you see on the Nutrition Facts labels on food products is somewhat standardized. Also, it’s a way for government agencies, like the USDA, to recommend amounts of different types of foods for optimal health and weight control.

Five Tips to Help You Avoid Portion Distortion
1. When looking at the Nutrition Facts label on a product, get in the habit of glancing at the serving size (this may be futile; sometimes it’s in grams or another unit that’s not user-friendly) and automatically doubling or tripling the calories, carbs, and other nutrients you check.

2. At restaurants, send half your plate back to the kitchen to be wrapped up as soon as you can without being rude.

3. Take out your measuring cups and train yourself — using water, dry rice or beans, and some play-dough — to know what a half-cup and a cup look like in your everyday bowls.

4. Train yourself to only order small or kid’s size when ordering anything at a restaurant, snack bar, etc.

5. Use a smaller plate when eating at home, and away from home, always leave some food on your plate (cancel your membership to the “clean plate club”).