

Fast-food portions keep getting bigger

Fast-food portions keep getting bigger, but you might not know it

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Fast-food restaurants may brag about their premium salads and apple fries, but for all the healthier items they've added to menus, portion bloat is bigger than ever.

Not only are servings getting larger, some top fast-food chains are engaged in a sleight-of-name game — marketing ploys which could confuse customers who think they're ordering less than they actually are, according to a study I co-authored with Dr. Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition at New York University, published in a recent *Journal of Public Health Policy*.

When McDonald's dumped its Supersize selections three years ago, many nutritionists were hopeful that restaurant chains and fast-food establishments would get back to thinking small.

Fat chance.

Are you going to finish that?

In the last few years, Hardee's, Burger King and Wendy's all have introduced 1,000-calorie-plus sandwiches stuffed with 12 ounces of beef — the amount of meat recommended for two days for most adults. In addition, Hardee's just rolled out a new Country Breakfast Burrito, a tortilla wrap stuffed with two egg omelets, sausage, bacon, ham, cheddar cheese, hash browns and gravy. The burrito contains 920 calories and 60 grams of fat, almost all the fat an adult needs in a single day.

Gorging on fast-food occasionally wouldn't be such a disaster, but Americans spend half their yearly food budget eating out. In my research on portion size trends, I found a parallel between rising rates of obesity and increasing portion sizes. Current fast-food servings are two to five times larger than they were in the 1950s. It's hard to believe the Big Mac was considered large when McDonald's introduced it 40 years ago. Today the Big Mac's roughly 3 ounces of meat are puny compared to the new mega-burgers. When McDonald's first opened, a soda was 7 ounces. Today, the child size is 12 ounces, a small is 16 ounces, and the large 32 ounces.

Are we that much thirstier or hungrier than we used to be?

That's a *really* big gulp

You can't order a Supersize soda at McDonald's anymore, but the fast-food giant recently introduced the Hugo, pouring in at a bladder-busting 42-ounces and 410-calories. Last year Wendy's rolled out its own 42-ounce version and Burger King also promotes a 42-ounce King Size soda. 7-Eleven offers the 64-ounce Double Gulp soda — a half-gallon, nearly 800-calorie drink marketed for *one* person. And

Starbucks sells jumbo-sized coffee drinks, such as the Venti Frappuccino Strawberries and Crème which contains well over 600 calories.

Biggie lives

The problem is, people tend to eat or drink what's in front of them. We also significantly underestimate how many calories we consume. But even when consumers try to do right by their diets by choosing a small or medium of something at a fast-food chain, they may be getting more than they expect.

Wendy's dropped the fattening-sounding Biggie sodas and Great Biggie french fries and went back to small, medium, and large sizes. But it was just a marketing gimmick. What was a medium order of french fries is now a small; the Biggie became a medium, and the Great Biggie became a large. Instead of a Biggie soda, you can order a large drink — but large is now 42 ounces, 10 ounces larger than it was a year ago as the Biggie.

Scaling back

To be fair, some restaurants have tried to scale it back. When Ruby Tuesday cut serving sizes in 2004, customers balked, and the big portions returned.

But that's because consumers are programmed into thinking that bigger size means bigger value. Larger portions are presented as a bargain for consumers because they're relatively cheap for restaurants to offer. Food costs less than other operating costs such as rent, staff, and equipment.

Big servings are not going away any time soon, but you don't have to be a victim of portion distortion. Here are some strategies to try:

- Steer clear of large, jumbo and king size orders. Even a medium portion can be big, so share it with a friend. Better yet, opt for the small.
- Eat half of what you order. Ask for a doggie bag and enjoy the rest on another day.
- Have a bottle of water or diet soda instead of a regular sugar-laden soda.
- Order a side salad with your meal.
- Savor your food and eat more slowly. Put your fork down between bites. This will help you eat less.

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