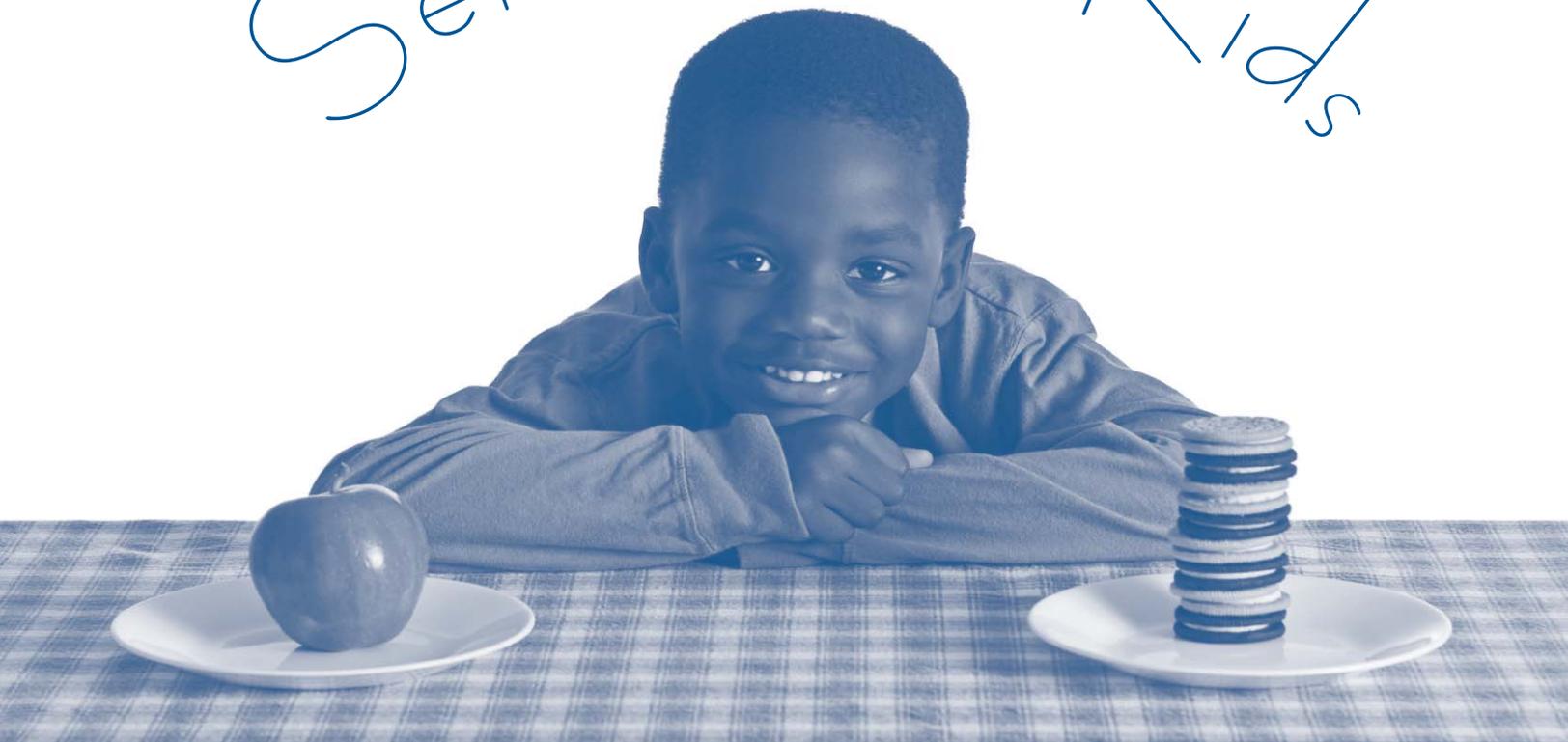


Serving our Kids



By Jacqueline Jacques, ND

Childhood Obesity has been steadily increasing in the United States for a variety of reasons. One of the reasons is the amount of food that many children consume in relation to their actual nutrition and energy needs. A challenge currently faced by parents (and others such as schools) involved in feeding children is the issue of portions. How do you know exactly how much food a child should consume?

For most parents, this concern comes from a loving parental desire to make sure that their children are well nourished so they can grow and thrive. Parents do not serve up food and encourage their children to clean their plates in an effort to cause weight gain and harm their child's health – they do it out of love.

While it may seem like our basic instincts should tell us how much food a child needs – or that a child's instincts should tell him when to eat more or less, this is not really the case most of the time.

[A Look at How Food Portions have Increased](#)

Since the early 1970s¹, food portions have been on the rise. Twenty years ago, a soda was 6.5 ounces and had 85 calories. Today, they are 20 ounces and have 250 calories. The average muffin has more than tripled in size and increased in calories from 200 to 500, and the average cheeseburger has doubled in both size and caloric load.

This is not just true for packaged foods – restaurant portions have continued to increase as our idea of what constitutes a serving continues to grow. This is why when many Americans travel abroad, they complain about small expensive meals – we are used to receiving portions of food much larger that are eaten in many countries around the globe. For almost all Americans today, our idea of a “normal” portion of food is often two to three times what a truly “normal” portion is.

This distorted view of a serving alters both how we feed ourselves and how we feed our children. If you couple a parental concern for creating a well fed child with a lack of knowledge about how much food a child really needs to be healthy, you have a recipe for parents overfeeding their kids.

[Looking at Research](#)

Research shows that when fed larger portions, children will eat a lot more than they need to. For example, a 2003 study that

served macaroni and cheese to 4-year-olds at a serving size twice as large as desirable for their age found that on average they ate 25 percent more than kids served an age-appropriate portion².

Calories

Most parents are not going to sit down and calculate the calories they are putting on their child’s plate, in their lunch box or ordering at a restaurant. Still, it is important to understand what the general needs are of a child to know how that relates to healthy portions.

The basic rule of thumb is that children up to age three need about 1,000 calories per day, and you can then add 100 calories per year up to age 18. If your child is involved in sports or other physical exertion, these needs will increase – but not by a very large amount. The chart below comes from the Institute of Medicine and outlines the recommended caloric intake for children of various ages.

Appropriate Portions for Kids

When you buy most foods at the supermarket, they come with a listed serving size. The serving size does not necessarily reflect the amount of the food you should always eat, but rather tells you a measured portion so that you can learn how much food you need to get the nutrients you want, and so that you can compare foods to each other for calories and nutrient content.

Most of the servings shown on packaged foods are based on a 2,000 calorie per day diet, so these may have to be adjusted down for younger or less active children. Even

with servings listed on a food, most of us will not weigh and measure food for every meal – and there are plenty of foods that have no packaging, like a steak and fresh fruits, vegetables and bakery items. Because of this, it is a good idea to know generally what a portion looks like so you can eyeball it.

The American Diabetes Association gives the following guidelines for kids⁶:

- 1/2 cup serving of canned fruit, vegetables or potatoes looks like half a tennis ball sitting on your plate
- 3 ounces of meat, fish or chicken is about the size of a deck of playing cards or the palm of your hand
- 1-ounce serving of cheese is about the size of your thumb
- 1-cup serving of milk, yogurt or fresh greens is about the size of your fist
- 1-teaspoon of oil is about the size of your thumb tip

Additionally:

- A serving of grains, beans or pasta is between 1/3 and 1/2 cup
- A serving of bread is one slice (Be careful – bread loaves have also gotten bigger in many cases. Look for regular sandwich loaves, or check the calories per slice on the package)
- A serving of dry cereal is 3/4 cup

Once you can start to visualize what these servings look like, it becomes easier to know if your child is eating too much or too little food each day.

Recommended Caloric Intake for Children

Gender	Age	Sedentary ⁱⁱⁱ	Moderately Active ^{iv}	Active ^v
Both	2-3	1,000	1,000 - 1,400	1,000 - 1,400
Female	4-8	1,200	1,400 - 1,600	1,400 - 1,800
	9-13	1,600	1,600 - 2,000	1,800 - 2,200
	14-18	1,800	2,000	2,400
Male	4-8	1,400	1,400 - 1,600	1,600 - 2,000
	9-13	1,800	1,800 - 2,200	2,000 - 2,600
	14-18	2,200	2,400 - 2,800	2,800 - 3,200

(Numbers based on Estimated Energy Requirements (EER) from the Institute of Medicine Dietary Reference Intakes macronutrients report, 2002)

The Issue of Seconds (or Thirds)

Another consideration when we talk about servings is the issue of seconds (or thirds). If you feel your child has had enough to eat at a given meal, try having him or her wait 30 minutes before serving a second helping. Often this is enough time for a feeling of fullness to settle in and seconds no longer seem necessary.

If you know in advance that you are serving a food that your child always asks for seconds of, try giving a smaller first portion so that the second portion is not going to be simply excess caloric intake.

The Right Foods

Usually what parents are trying to do in making sure their kids eat enough is to make sure they get the nourishment they need to grow and develop into strong healthy people. To make sure your kids do this, it is not only important to serve the healthy portions, but also to ensure they get the right foods in their diet.

Making a Change

If you and your kids are used to eating larger portions, it may not be entirely easy to make this sort of change. An interesting fact: not only have our portions grown throughout the past three decades, so have our plates and utensils.

While you cannot control what restaurants do, you can use some tricks at home to make normal food servings look “bigger” – this is a powerful trick for the brain that may see a normal portion as inadequate if it is swimming in a huge bowl or only taking up a corner of a large plate.

- Use your salad plates. The average U.S. salad plate is the size of a normal dinner plate in many countries. You will find that normal portions nicely fill a salad plate giving the impression of more food. Bowls are harder, but if you look you can usually find small ones at a home store – often in great colors, which kids love.
- Use small utensils. Salad forks can be great. Spoons are harder, but you can find small teaspoons if you look. In a pinch, plastic utensils are almost always small. Using smaller utensils leads to smaller bites. Smaller bites equal more bites, which feels like eating more.
- Serve caloric drinks like milk or 100 percent juice in small cups, or single-serving containers.
- Buy or make pre-measured servings of foods for your kids to snack on so that they are not left to guess on their own how much they should eat at one time.

The American Diabetes Association provides the following general guidelines for making healthy food choices:

- Eat at least five servings of fruits and vegetables every day. (Include a variety of colors such as green, yellow, orange and red.)
- Aim for six servings of breads, cereals and starchy vegetables. (Starchy vegetables include peas, corn, potatoes and dried beans such as pinto or kidney beans.)
- Choose two to three servings of low-fat dairy products like skim or 1 percent milk or non-fat yogurt.
- Choose lean meats, chicken and fish. (Pick meats without visible fat and remove skin from chicken and other poultry. Try to include two to three servings of fish per week. Avoid fried meats.)
- Cut back on sweets and desserts. (Most desserts are high in calories and do not contain many vitamins and minerals.)

These are just some basic tips, but together with simple portion control, they form the foundation of a lifetime healthy eating habits.

Another important thing: once you are comfortable with the correct portion sizes for your child, teach them to serve themselves as well. This way they start to learn to control the amount of food they take on their own – an important skill as they get older.

Eating Out

Dining out is often the hardest time to stick with portion control – even kids’ meals in restaurants are often enough or more food than most adults need. Still, this is important to consider because Americans eat an average of one in five meals away from home.

Kids may not only dine out with their parents, but may also eat school lunches or other prepared meals. If you are eating out with your kids, be sure to get familiar with the portions of the foods served. It is always OK to ask for half the meal to come out and have half boxed to take home. You can also consider splitting a meal with your child or splitting between two children. If your child is eating regular meals at school, try to make him or her familiar with what a serving of a food is. If you can, review the cafeteria menu and discuss food choices each week.

It is true that the habits we form as children are the most lasting – and the hardest to break. Creating a healthy idea of food portions for your child now can be a powerful tool in life-long weight control.

About the Author:

Jacqueline Jacques, ND, is a Naturopathic Doctor with more than a decade of expertise in medical nutrition. She is the Chief Science Officer for Catalina Lifesciences LLC, a company dedicated to providing the best of nutritional care to weight-loss surgery patients. Her greatest love is empowering patients to better their own health. Dr. Jacques is a member of the OAC National Board of Directors.

Resources:

1. *USDA MyPyramid for Kids:* www.mypyramid.gov/kids/index.html
2. *USDA/ARS Children's Nutrition Research Center at Baylor College of Medicine:* www.bcm.edu/cnrc/resources/kids.html
3. *National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute WeCan! Program:* www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/obesity/wecan/

(Endnotes)

- i. *Nielsen SJ, Popkin BM. Patterns and trends in food portion sizes, 1977–1998. JAMA 2003;289:450–3.*
- ii. *Fisher JO, Rolls BJ, Birch LL. Children's bite size and intake of an entrée are greater with large portions than with age-appropriate or self-selected portions. Am J Clin Nutr 2003;77:1164–70.*
- iii. *Sedentary - a lifestyle that includes only the light physical activity associated with typical day-to-day life.*
- iv. *Moderately Active - a lifestyle that includes physical activity equivalent to walking about 1.5 to 3 miles per day at 3 to 4 miles per hour; in addition to the light physical activity associated with typical day-to-day life.*
- v. *Active - a lifestyle that includes physical activity equivalent to walking more than 3 miles per day at 3 to 4 miles per hour; in addition to the light physical activity associated with typical day-to-day life.*
- vi. www.diabetes.org/for-parents-and-kids/diabetes-care/portion-control.jsp.



ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



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The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
 - Community Discussion Forum
 - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



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