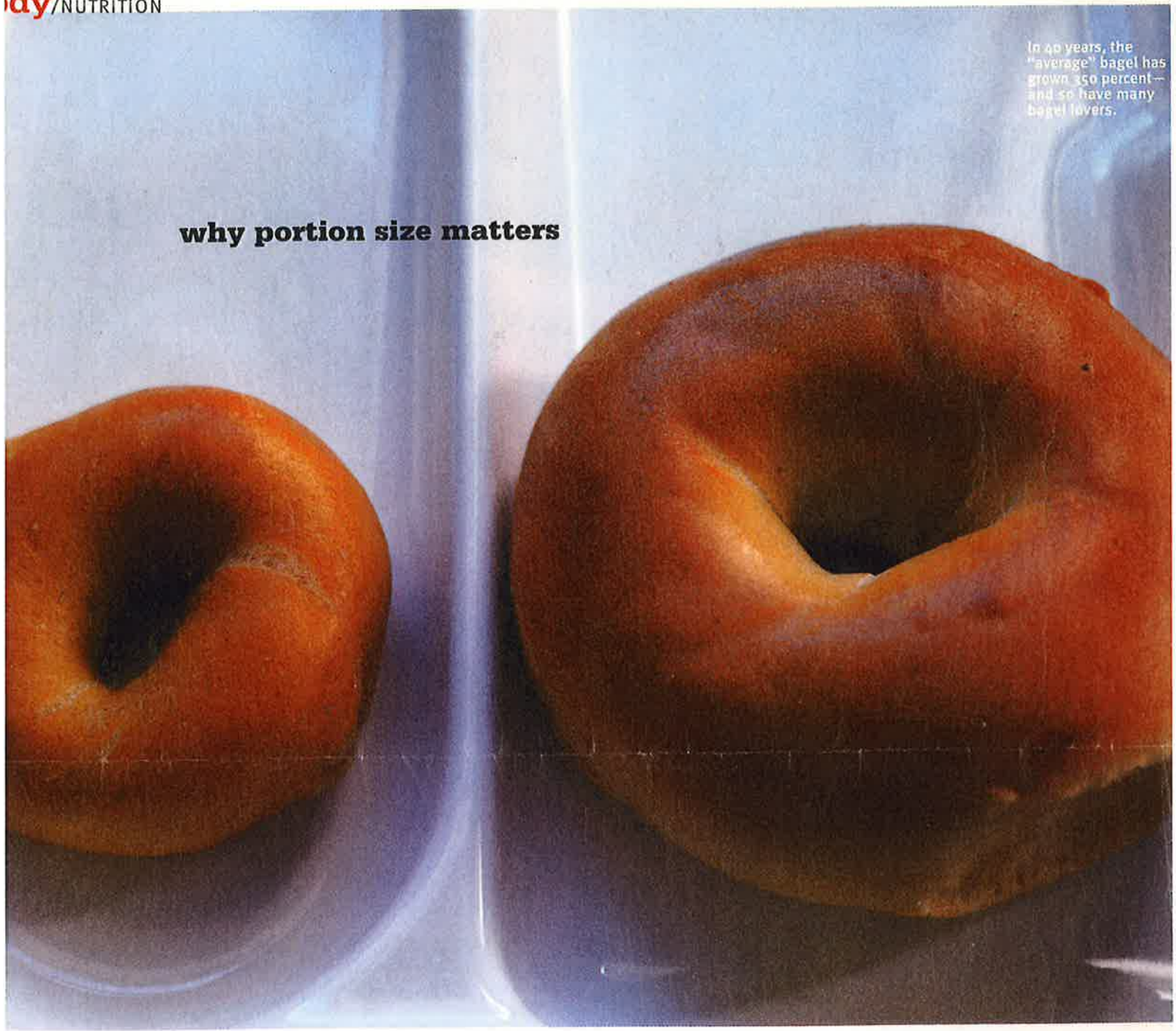


In 40 years, the "average" bagel has grown 350 percent—and so have many bagel lovers.

why portion size matters



Depending on your point of view, the widespread weight problem in America represents either the ultimate irony or the ultimate no-brainer. Numerous physicians wring their hands in a recent special issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* devoted to the obesity epidemic.

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PHOTOGRAPH BY MARIA ROBLEDO

Fad diets like *Dr. Atkins' New Diet Revolution*, *The Carbohydrate Addict's Diet*, and *The Zone* remain ensconced at the top of best-seller lists. Popular diet experts marvel over Americans' apparent devotion to low-fat foods and speculate that maybe it's our lack of physical activity that's making us so fat. We are probably the most nutritionally aware of any national population, constantly confronted with breakdowns of fat, carbohydrates, and protein; schooled in optimum body-fat percentages per age and sex; and inundated with the mathematical formula to determine our personal body-mass index.

Yet a visitor from Jupiter would take one look at our overfilled, 14-inch plates—or buckets of popcorn or softball-size muffins—and cry: “They just eat too much!” In the last decade or so (the same decade that has seen obesity overtake 20 percent of the population, up from less than 15 percent), **portion sizes have ballooned so dramatically that anyone eating out on a regular basis and cleaning the plate is almost guaranteed to gain weight.** “There's a strong correlation between increasing body weight in this country and increasing size of food portions,” says Lisa Young, a nutritionist at New York University who just completed a Ph.D. dissertation devoted entirely to portion size in America. “In the '80s, the average person gained eight pounds, and that's exactly when portion sizes got big.”

To track the insidious growth of servings, Young became a portion detective, scouring archival trade publications, popular magazines, food-company records, even quizzing

food-industry personnel to find, for instance, that commercial muffin tins started getting bigger in the '80s. She also conducted studies of consumers and found proof of the most dangerous result of the bigger-is-better trend: No one knows what a normal portion is anymore. In a separate study, Young asked a group of students to bring in their concept of medium items. “They brought in muffins as big as seven or eight ounces, because their concept of medium is what's in the food supply,” Young said. (The FDA-approved definition of a normal muffin is two ounces.) “We're supersizing ourselves into obesity,” says Patricia Esperon, a behavioral therapist at the Duke University Diet and Fitness Center, a residential weight-loss facility that caters to the seriously overweight.

The simple fact is that, with all good intentions, humans eat more food when more food is placed in front of them. “Studies show that given unlimited food, rats will eat until they die,” says Carrie Latt Wiatt, a diet expert and the author of *Portion Savvy* (Pocket Books), a book that includes cardboard pop-out shapes of various appropriate portions. “Humans aren't that different; we'll eat until we stuff ourselves.” In fact, research with humans has proven exactly that, says Barbara Rolls, Ph.D., professor of nutrition at Pennsylvania State University. Rolls cites studies in which people eating out of an eight-ounce bucket of popcorn ate 46 percent more than those given a smaller, four-ounce size, and in which women who were asked to pour out an appropriate amount of spaghetti to make dinner for two ended up taking an average of 234 strands from a one-pound box, but an average of 302 strands out of a larger, two-pound box. Rolls recently concluded a study that demonstrates how early the influence of portion size begins. She found that three-year-old preschoolers ate the same amount of macaroni and cheese regardless of how much was put on their plate, while five-year-olds ate more when given larger portions.

Another problem with our constant exposure to outsized portions, according to Marion Nestle, Ph.D., chair of New

how to eat like a thin person

AT HOME Measure, measure, measure.

“Learn exactly where one ounce of cereal comes to on the bowl,” says Carrie Latt Wiatt. “Learn exactly what four ounces of chicken look like.” Patricia Esperon advises going back to the scales and measuring cups once or twice a month to resist the insidious encroachment of larger portions. Buy small or individual portions of everything you can, even though it's more expensive: individual yogurts, frozen-yogurt bars, chips or snack bags, string cheese, etc. Bigger containers mean you eat more food.

Downsize your plates and bowls. It's a fact that restaurant plates have grown from eight to 12 inches, on average. It helps you visualize a normal portion if you use smaller sizes—what used to be considered normal. Distribute your intake of high-calorie foods over the day. “If you're going to have pasta for lunch,” says Lisa Young, “don't have a bagel for breakfast.”

EATING OUT Order appetizer sizes or half orders. “I find appetizers perfectly satisfactory as dinner-size portions,” says Marion Nestle.

Ask for a smaller plate and use it to dish out a realistic portion, then send the rest away or have it wrapped up to take home. “If you keep it there in front of you, you'll still have the aroma, the sight of it; you'll keep eating it,” says Wiatt. “You have to get it off the table.”

Get a salad and share a main dish. “You can't leave it up to the restaurant to decide your portions,” says Young.

York University's Department of Nutrition and Food Studies, is that "it's just not possible to know how many calories you're taking in. I can't do it; you can't do it." She should know: Nestle helped construct a study conducted by Lisa Young in which Young presented several dieticians with plates of restaurant portions and asked them to estimate calories and fat content. "They had no idea," says Young. The dieticians' estimates were off by as much as 50 percent. "If the dieticians can't do it, who can?" Young says.

The government, for all its well-intentioned efforts at instruction, has only added to the confusion. The USDA's Food Guide Pyramid, presented to the public with great fanfare in 1992, defines serving sizes in a Lilliputian shorthand few people can understand. Thus, one serving of bread is considered one slice, usually one ounce in weight—meaning that a big, deli-style bagel could be as many as seven servings at one sitting. One serving of pasta is defined as one-half cup—about one sixth of the amount that's likely to grace your plate at a restaurant. "Who would eat half a cup of pasta?" says Nestle. "Nobody—except maybe a one-year-old." Just to confound things further, different arms of the federal government don't agree on serving sizes. **"The serving you see on the back of a food label, which is regulated by the FDA, is going to differ from a food-pyramid serving size,"** says Young. "For instance, the USDA's food pyramid calls one juice serving six ounces, and the FDA calls it eight ounces, or one cup."

Those looking for conspiracy theories as to why we are being confronted with supersize fries and 32-ounce soft drinks need to go beyond governmental regulations to that engine that drives most of American life: commercialism. It costs food suppliers pennies to supersize portions of almost any item, which they can then tout as a value—a particularly potent idea for many Americans, says Esperon. "American culture has always been more into

quantity over quality," she says. "One of the things I try to convince my clients of is that they need to stop worrying about getting their money's worth."

Esperon's strategy is to remind them of how much a heart catheterization would cost, if they were to develop heart disease as a result of their obesity. Her approach—knowledge over ignorance, forethought over impulse—can be applied wholesale to the problem of portion control. **What it boils down to is a little information and a lot of common sense.** If the average-size person should take in 2,000 to 2,500 calories a day, does it really make sense to consume a 64-ounce Double Gulp from 7-Eleven that contains 800 calories? Does it make more sense to let the kitchen staffs of various restaurants decide for you what is an appropriate amount to eat, or to learn what a four-ounce portion of meat or chicken looks like and eat accordingly? It can be done, as Nestle found out last year when she lost 10 pounds in an effort to lower her cholesterol levels. "It requires conscious thought," Nestle says. "You have to think: What is a reasonable amount to eat? Then you have to very consciously stop eating when you're full. It's hard to do, but if you don't, you'll end up eating too much. It's that simple." ■

myth vs. reality

*"Official" serving (either FDA or USDA)
Typical restaurant serving*

movie popcorn

OFFICIAL **3 cups, no butter (160 cal.)**
TYPICAL **5m: 7 cups, no butter (400 cal.)**
Med: 16 cups, no butter (900 cal.)

pancakes

OFFICIAL **3 (4 oz., 240 cal.)**
TYPICAL **4 (10 oz., 610 cal.)**

tuna sandwich

OFFICIAL **4 oz. (340 cal.)**
TYPICAL **11 oz. (720 cal.)**

ham sandwich

OFFICIAL **4 oz. (240 cal.)**
TYPICAL **9 oz. (560 cal.)**

lasagna

OFFICIAL **1 cup (430 cal.)**
TYPICAL **2 cups (960 cal.)**

blueberry muffin

OFFICIAL **2 oz. (190 cal.)**
TYPICAL **4 oz. (430 cal.)**

- FROM CENTER FOR SCIENCE IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST'S NUTRITION ACTION HEALTHLETTER

invasion of the supersizes

ITEM	1960 to 1980	1990 to 2000
LARGE SODA*	16 oz.	32 oz.
CANDY BAR	2 oz.	4 oz. "King Size"
FRENCH FRIES*	2 1/2 oz.	6.9 oz. supersize
MUFFIN	2-3 oz.	5-7 oz.
BAGEL	2-3 oz.	4-7 oz.
COFFEEHOUSE/ CAFE COOKIE	1/2 oz.	4 oz.

*AT FAST-FOOD FRANCHISES
- FROM "PORTION SIZES IN THE AMERICAN FOOD SUPPLY," BY LISA YOUNG