

Serving Sizes

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Glasses, dishes, bowls, servings, spoonfuls, pieces and portions are food size descriptions that can have many meanings. They may convey a specific meaning to one individual and an entirely different meaning to another. Knowing the exact amount in a serving is necessary for planning and evaluating an individual's daily food intake for good nutrition. It also helps determine the appropriate amount of food to buy.

Serving size refers to a specific amount of food. This specific amount of food can be based on amounts normally eaten by individuals or on amounts of a food that contribute particular nutrients to the diet. Foods have been divided into groups according to types and amounts of certain nutrients they contribute to the diet. Therefore, we can say that recommended serving sizes are based on the nutrient contribution of a specific amount of food within a food group. For example, milk foods are listed by cup measure, meat foods by ounce, vegetables and fruits by half-cup or raw size (small, medium, large), breads by slice and cereals by ounce of ready-to-eat cereal or 1/2 to 3/4 cup measure of cooked cereal, cornmeal, grits, rice or pastas.

When using food tables, specific descriptions of amounts of food eaten are important in order to estimate nutrient adequacy of a diet. Small differences in reporting serving sizes can make big differences in total nutrients and calories eaten over a period of time. For example, a 3-inch cookie contains more nutrients and calories than a 2-inch cookie. A 4-ounce piece of meat has more nutrients and calories than a 2- or 3-ounce piece. Raw fruits and vegetables also come in multiple sizes as does sliced bread. Therefore, accurate reporting of serving sizes can make quite a difference in nutrient content estimations and may mean the difference between a 1200- and 1500-calorie diet plan.

A few basic tools can be used to find out what size portions are served in a household. A one-cup fluid measure can be used to determine beverage sizes. A set of dry measuring cups can easily measure the amount of ready-to-eat cereals weighing a specific number of ounces or serving of cooked fruits and vegetables. A small 8-ounce scale is most appropriate for weighing cooked meats to determine portion size. Even a ruler for measuring meat thickness or diameter of cookies is helpful. Standard measuring spoons also are necessary to accurately gauge the amount of margarine, butter, salad dressing, etc. used.

Remember that food composition and calorie tables list nutrients and calories in food by specific serving size. Foods eaten should be compared to these standards, then adjustments in the nutrients or calories should be made up or down depending on the amount consumed. Individuals who are responsible for estimating portions should weigh and measure foods periodically to check the accuracy of estimating portion sizes. Many times this is the key to weight control.

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