

7 Tricks to Finally Nail the Whole Portion Control Thing

by SELF

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When searching for healthy eating or weight loss tips, the phrase “portion control” pops up time and again. Simply put, controlling your portions means sticking to a set amount (portion) of food in one sitting: The right amount depends on your calorie and nutrient needs. And, of course, what actually fills you up. Whether you’re trying to lose weight or just develop healthy eating habits, it’s important to have a good idea of what a healthy portion looks like.

“Portion is different than serving size,” Caroline Kaufman, R.D., tells SELF. “The serving size is a measured amount of food or drink (what you see on a nutrition label) and your portion is the amount you actually consume,” she explains. For example, one serving of granola may be listed as a quarter cup, but if you have two servings, your portion is a half cup. Oftentimes, the right portion size is one serving, but that’s not always true.

Portion control is an important part of a weight loss plan.

If you’re trying to lose weight, knowing the nutrition content of one serving and then controlling your portions is the best way to monitor calorie intake. It’s important to also note that counting calories, and losing weight in general, is not for everyone. There are also many other factors, like sleep habits, stress, and genetics that can influence weight loss, making it about way more than just calorie intake. If you have a history of disordered eating, you should always speak with your doctor before changing your eating habits.

Even if weight loss isn’t your goal, sticking to reasonable portions helps keep meals balanced and nutritious.

The goal is to eat a reasonably sized meal that fills you up and is nutritionally diverse. “You want to make sure your plate isn’t all red meat, for example, and that you’re getting a little bit of variety,” Jackie Baumrind, M.S., senior dietitian at Selvera Wellness, tells SELF.

There are lots of guidelines comparing foods to everyday objects—for example, a single portion of protein should be about the size of a deck of cards. (For more examples, check out this pretty comprehensive list by the Mayo Clinic.) You can also use measuring cups to dole out portions according to serving sizes and then adjust depending on your personal needs.

But we're not all walking around with a deck of cards or our trusty measuring cups in our purses. Here, Kaufman and Baumrind share some easier ways to naturally eat healthy portion sizes, so you can develop better eating habits without spending so much energy fussing over it.

1. ALWAYS AIM FOR A 50/25/25 PLATE

The best way to eyeball healthy portions? Fill your plate or bowl with 50 percent veggies or salad, 25 percent lean protein, and 25 percent starchy vegetables or carbs. This helps you roughly control portions automatically. "If a quarter of your plate is for protein, it's hard to fit a 12-ounce sirloin into that corner," Baumrind jokes. This also helps you fill up on veggies, which are low in calories and fat.

2. EAT OFF SMALLER PLATES

"Use salad plates and cereal bowls instead of dinner plates and large soup bowls," Kaufman suggests. Why? It essentially tricks your mind into thinking you're eating more than you are. Whether we're eating at a restaurant or cooking at home, we all want our plates to look full, Baumrind notes. "We eat with our eyes and nose first." A salad plate that's piled high with food looks and seems more filling than a scantily topped large dinner plate—prepping you to expect to be full once you've cleaned it.

3. SET ASIDE LEFTOVERS BEFORE YOUR MEAL

If you're cooking dinner and intend to have leftovers for lunch or the next night, portion it out before you even sit down to eat, Baumrind says. That way, you can determine the correct portions before you dig in. It's much harder to stop eating when there's still delicious, home-cooked food on your plate.

4. GO HALVSIES AT RESTAURANTS

Either with yourself or another person. "Most places, it's enough for two people," Baumrind notes. "Ask the waiter to package up half before they bring it to the table," she suggests. "Or split a main course with whomever you're with."

5. STOP EATING STRAIGHT FROM THE BAG

"Portion out a certain amount of food (use the serving size on the container as your guide) and go back for seconds of the same amount if you want more," Kaufman says. When you're taking snacks on the go, portion them into Ziploc bags, Baumrind says. "Grabbing something like a cheese stick or single-serve yogurt is good because it's already portioned," she adds.

6. SURVEY THE SCENE AT A BUFFET

It's easy to forget everything you've been taught about healthy portion sizes and eating with your stomach not your eyes when you have endless options and feel like you should get your money's worth. Kaufman suggests taking a lap and surveying all the options on the buffet before digging in. That way, you can decide what you really want to put on your plate and portion accordingly. If you decide you're hungry for seconds, just stick to the suggested proportions (see #1) when you serve yourself again.

7. SEPARATE MEALTIME AND TV TIME

Eating when you're distracted pretty much guarantees you'll overeat—if you don't take the time to pay attention to what you're putting into your mouth, it's tough to recognize when you're full. To be more mindful, avoid eating in front of a screen, Kaufman says. That means both your TV and your laptop. Baumrind goes one step further: "Turn off your phone or put it away and sit quietly, enjoy the company [of others] and the food."