

## NUTRITION

✓ Evidence Based

# 9 Tips to Measure and Control Portion Sizes



Written by Mary Jane Brown, PhD, RD (UK) on November 19, 2018

Obesity is a growing epidemic, as more people than ever are struggling to control their weight.

Increased portion sizes are thought to contribute to overeating and unwanted weight gain (1<sup>✓</sup>).

Research indicates that many factors can influence how much you eat.

People tend to eat almost all of what they serve themselves. Therefore,

SUBSCRIBE



Here are 9 tips to measure and control portion sizes — both at home and on the go.



ADVERTISEMENT



## 1. Use Smaller Dinnerware

Evidence suggests that sizes of plates, spoons and glasses can unconsciously influence how much food someone eats (2 ✓, 3 ✓, 4 ✓).

For example, using large plates can make food appear smaller — often leading to overeating.

In one study, people using a large bowl ate 77% more **pasta** than those using a medium-sized bowl (5 ✓).

In another study, nutritional experts served themselves 31% more **ice cream** when given larger bowls and 14.5% more when provided with larger serving spoons (6 ✓).

Interestingly, most people who ate more due to large dishes were completely unaware of the change in portion size (7 ✓).

Therefore, swapping your usual plate, bowl or serving spoon for a smaller alternative can reduce the helping of food and prevent overeating.

Most people feel just as full having eaten from a smaller dish as from a large one.



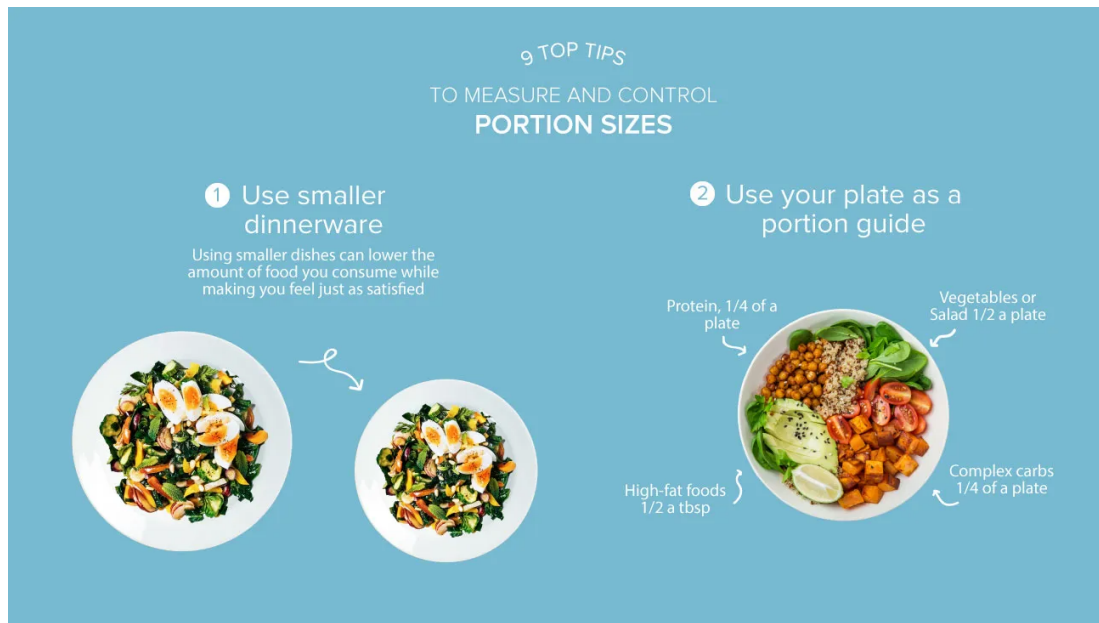
**Summary** Simply

ADVERTISEMENT



drink you  
consume. What's more, people tend to feel just as satisfied.

## 2. Use Your Plate as a Portion Guide



If measuring or weighing food isn't appealing, try using your plate or bowl as a portion control guide.

This can help you determine the optimal [macronutrient ratio](#) for a well-balanced meal.

A rough guide for each meal is:

- **Vegetables or salad:** Half a plate
- **High-quality protein:** Quarter of a plate — this includes meat, poultry, fish, eggs, dairy, tofu, beans and pulses
- **Complex carbs:** Quarter of a plate — such as whole grains and [starchy vegetables](#)

ADVERTISEMENT



Remember that this is a rough guide, as people have different dietary needs. For example, those who are more physically active often require more food.

As vegetables and salad are naturally low in calories but high in fiber and other nutrients, filling up on these may help you avoid overeating calorie-dense foods.

If you want extra guidance, some manufacturers sell portion-control plates.

**Summary** Using a plate as a guide for portion control can help you curb total food intake. You can divide your plate into sections based on different food groups.

ADVERTISEMENT

### 3. Use Your Hands as a Serving Guide

Another way to gauge appropriate portion size without any measuring tools is by simply using your hands.

ADVERTISEMENT



As your hands usually correspond to your body size, bigger people who require more food typically have bigger hands (8<sup>✓</sup>).

A rough guide for each meal is:

- **High-protein foods:** A palm-sized serving for women and two palm-sized portions for men — such as meat, fish, poultry and beans
- **Vegetables and salads:** A fist-sized portion for women and two fist-sized portions for men
- **High-carb foods:** One cupped-hand portion for women and two for men — such as whole grains and starchy vegetables
- **High-fat foods:** One thumb-sized portion for women and two for men — such as butter, oils and nuts

### Summary Your

hands can be a helpful guide for portion sizes. Different food groups correspond to various shapes and parts of your hands.

## 4. Ask for a Half Portion When Eating Out

**9 TOP TIPS TO MEASURE AND CONTROL PORTION SIZES**

**3 Use your hands as a serving guide**

- A palm-sized serving for women and two palm-sized portions for men
- A thumb-sized portion for women and 2 thumb-sized portions for men
- A fist-sized portion for women and 2 fist-sized portions for men

**4 When Eating Out Ask For A Half Portion**

Restaurant serving sizes are on average 2.5 times larger than standard ones.

ADVERTISEMENT

Restaurants are notorious for serving large portions (1<sup>✓</sup>).

In fact, restaurant serving sizes are, on average, about 2.5 times larger than standard serving sizes — and up to a whopping eight times larger (1<sup>✓</sup>, 3<sup>✓</sup>, 9<sup>✓</sup>).

If you are eating out, you can always ask for a half portion or a children's dish.

This will save you a lot of **calories** and help prevent overeating.

Alternatively, you could share a meal with someone or order a starter and side instead of a main dish.

Other tips include ordering a side salad or **vegetables**, asking for sauces and dressings to be served separately and avoiding buffet-style, all-you-can-eat restaurants where it's very easy to overindulge.

### **Summary** Restaurant

portions tend to be at least twice the size of a regular portion.

Prevent

overeating by asking for a half portion, ordering a starter instead of a main dish and avoiding buffet-style restaurants.

## **5. Start All Meals With a Glass of Water**

Drinking a glass of water up to 30 minutes before a meal will naturally aid portion control.

Filling up on water will make you feel less hungry. Being **well hydrated**

ADVERTISEMENT



One study in middle-aged and older adults observed that drinking 17 ounces (500 ml) of water before each meal resulted in a 44% greater decline in weight over 12 weeks, most likely due to reduced food intake (10 ✓).

Similarly, when overweight and obese older adults drank 17 ounces (500 ml) of water 30 minutes before a meal, they consumed 13% fewer calories without trying to make any changes (11 ✓).

In another study in young normal-weight men, drinking a similar amount of water immediately before a meal resulted in greater feelings of fullness and reduced food intake (12 ✓).

Therefore, having a glass of [water](#) before each meal can help prevent overeating and aid portion control.

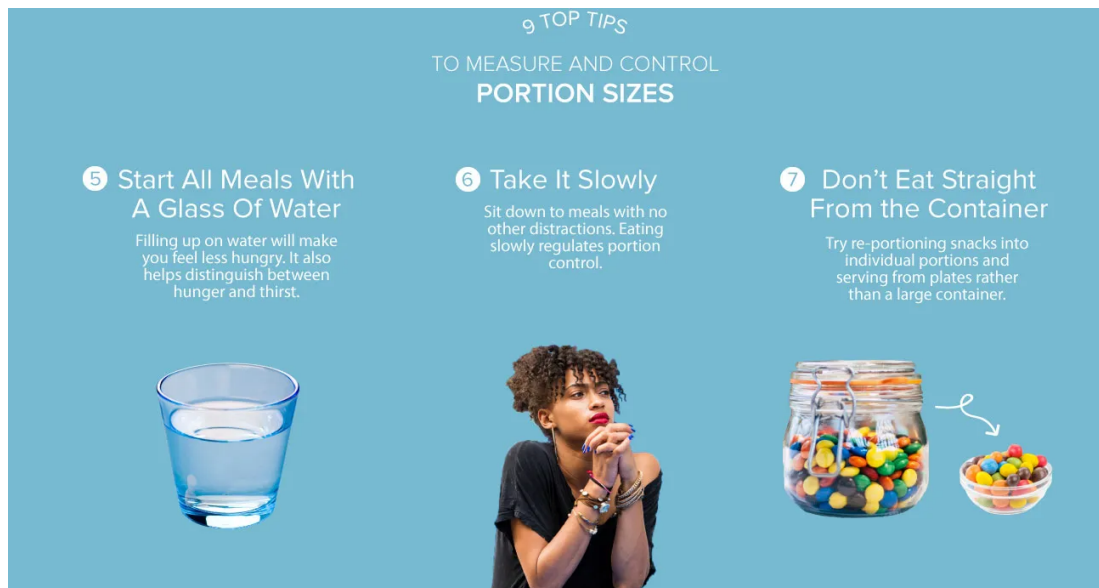
### **Summary** Drinking

a glass of water up to 30 minutes before a meal can naturally result in reduced food intake and greater feelings of fullness.

ADVERTISEMENT

ADVERTISEMENT





Eating quickly makes you less aware of getting full — and therefore increases your likelihood of overeating.

As your brain can take around 20 minutes to register that you are full after eating, [slowing down](#) can reduce your total intake.

For example, one study in healthy women noted that eating slowly led to greater feelings of fullness and a decrease in food intake compared to [eating quickly](#) (13 ✓).

What's more, the women who ate slowly tended to enjoy their meal more (13 ✓).

In addition, eating on the go or while distracted or watching TV boosts your likelihood of overeating (14 ✓).

Therefore, focusing on your meal and refusing to rush increases the chances you'll enjoy it and control your portion sizes.

Health experts recommend taking smaller bites and chewing every mouthful at least five or six times before swallowing (15 ✓).

ADVERTISEMENT



likelihood of  
overeating.

## 7. Don't Eat Straight From the Container

Jumbo-size packages or food served from large containers encourages overeating and less awareness of appropriate portion sizes.

This is especially true for [snacks](#).

Evidence suggests that people tend to eat more out of large packages than small ones — regardless of food taste or quality ([16](#) ✓, [17](#) ✓).

For example, people ate 129% more candies when served from a large container than a small one ([16](#) ✓).

In another study, participants consumed over 180 fewer grams of snacks per week when given 100-gram snack packs than when given snacks in standard-sized packages ([17](#) ✓).

Rather than eating snacks from the original packaging, empty them into a small bowl to prevent eating more than you need.

The same applies to [bulk portions](#) of family meals. Rather than serving food directly from the stove, re-portion it onto plates before serving. Doing so will help prevent overfilling your plate and discourage returning for seconds.

**Summary** Eating food from larger packages or containers encourages increased intake. Try re-portioning snacks into individual portions and serving family meals from plates to prevent overeating.

ADVERTISEMENT



## 8. Be Aware of Suitable Serving Size

Research indicates that we can't always rely on our own judgment of appropriate portion size (18 ✓).

This is because many factors affect portion control.

However, it may help to invest in a scale or measuring cup to weigh food and correctly assess your intake (19 ✓).

[Reading food labels](#) also increases awareness of proper portions.

Knowing recommended serving sizes for commonly eaten foods can help you moderate your intake.

Here are some examples:

- **Cooked**  
**pasta or rice:** 1/2 cup (75 and 100 grams, respectively)
- **Vegetables**  
**and salad:** 1–2 cups (150–300 grams)
- **Breakfast**  
**cereal:** 1 cup (40 grams)
- **Cooked**  
**beans:** 1/2 cup (90 grams)
- **Nut butter:** 2  
tablespoons (16 grams)
- **Cooked**  
**meats:** 3 ounces (85 grams)

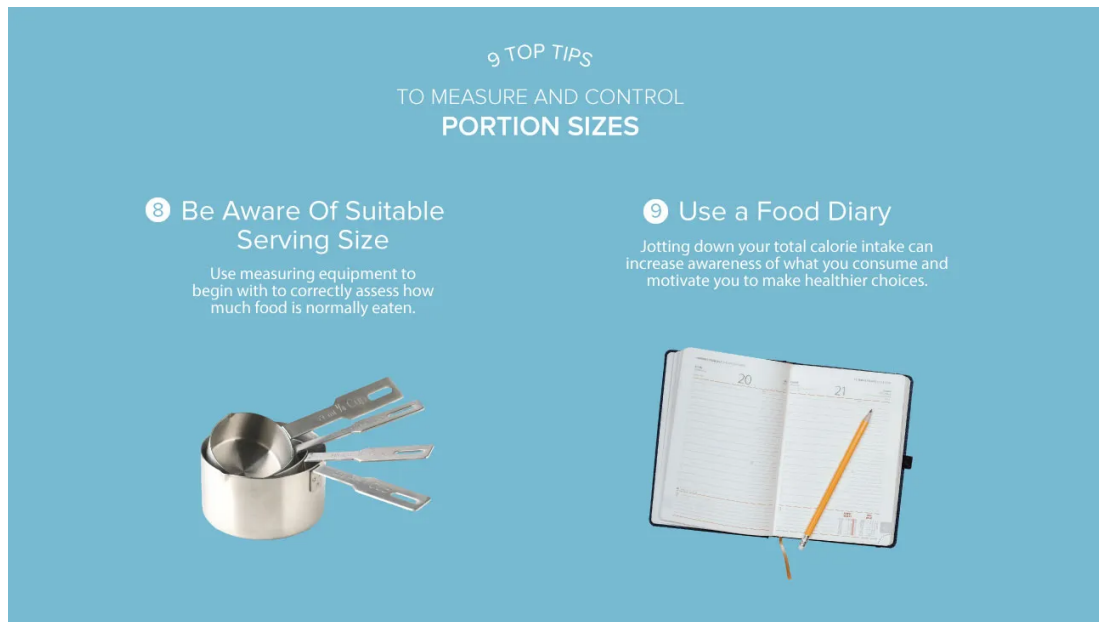
You don't always have to measure your meals. However, doing so may be helpful for a short period to develop awareness of what an appropriate portion size looks like. After a while, you may not need to measure everything.

ADVERTISEMENT



**Summary** Using measuring equipment can help increase awareness of portion sizes and correctly assess how much food is normally eaten.

## 9. Use a Food Diary



Research suggests that people are often surprised at how much food they eat (3<sup>✓</sup>, 20<sup>✓</sup>).

For example, one study found that 21% of people who ate more due to having larger serving bowls denied having eaten more (21).

Writing down all food and drink intake can increase awareness of the type and amount of foods you're consuming.

In weight-loss studies, those who kept a **food diary** tended to lose more weight overall (22).

This likely occurred because they became more aware of what they ate — including their **unhealthy choices** — and adjusted their diet accordingly.

ADVERTISEMENT



### Summary Jotting

down your total calorie intake can increase awareness of what you consume. This can motivate you to make healthier choices and reduce your chances of overeating.

## The Bottom Line

Unwanted weight gain may start with large portion sizes.

However, there are many practical steps you can take to control portions. These simple changes have proven successful in reducing portions without compromising on taste or feelings of fullness.

For example, measuring your food, using smaller dishes, drinking water prior to meals and eating slowly can all reduce your risk of overeating.

At the end of the day, portion control is a quick fix that improves your quality of life and may prevent bingeing.



FEEDBACK:  

## READ THIS NEXT

ADVERTISEMENT

