



Watch serving size to avoid weight gain

Have you noticed that there are more and more people starting to resemble the shape of the Food Guide Pyramid? Americans now rank as the heaviest average population of any nation in the world. More than 1 out of 3 people in the U.S. are considered obese (greater than 20 to 30 percent over ideal body weight). This is an increase from 1 out of 4 people just 15 years ago, and these statistics don't include people who are just overweight.

In many ways, this change in the shape of Americans doesn't make sense. After all, there are more low-fat and nonfat foods available and new low-fat items (with nutrient information right on the container) appear on grocery shelves daily. There have never been more exercise opportunities available either. Organized opportunities like gyms and exercise programs abound. Outdoor opportunities such as water-sports, walking, hiking, jogging, and biking are readily available and socially desirable.

So why is the shape of Americans changing? In the simplest terms, weight gain occurs when calorie intake is greater than our energy needs. Weight gain occurs from eating too many calories. This can be caused by: 1) just eating too much food, 2) eating excess foods rich in fats and

oils and/or 3) having decreased energy needs due to a decrease in physical activity.

One possible reason for Americans eating too much food is a partial understanding of the Food Guide Pyramid, one of the best known graphics in America. Thy Pyramid appears on cereal boxes, bread packages and numerous other food products. Food Guide Pyramid concepts also are taught in our schools.

Many people know that the base of the Pyramid and therefore the recommended base of our diet is made up of 6-11 servings of bread, cereal, rice, or pasta each day. However, not knowing the amount of food that makes up a "serving" may be the problem.

Is a typical scoop of rice (3/4 cup) – 1, 1-1/2 or 2 servings?

The answer is 1-1/2 servings.

Is a bagel – 1, 1-1/2 or 2 servings?

The answer depends on the size of your bagel. Are you eating the old style bagel 2-3 ounces bagel which is 2 servings or the 4-7 ounce bagel more commonly found today which is 4-7 servings.

And what about your morning muffin? Today's mega-muffin is equivalent to 4-7 bread servings and include a calorie bonus of 25-50

grams of fat – enough for a whole day's fat intake for most of us.

Is being confused about serving sizes enough to cause a lot of weight gain? Yes.

Last year one fifth-grade class project was to eat as suggested by the Pyramid. All the students kept strict food diaries. One 10-year old girl made every effort to meet the low-end of the serving range for this project. As her weight increased rapidly, the teacher became concerned. The student indicated that she was eating only 4 bread servings. On discussion with the student the 4 "bread" servings turned out to be 4 mega-muffins and was equivalent to at least 16 bread servings and over 2,000 calories just from the muffins.

The moral of this story is twofold: 1. The Food Guide Pyramid is a good graphic for stressing the proper proportions of various types of foods in the overall diet and 2. To use the Pyramid to promote health, we must learn what really constitutes a serving of the various types of foods.

For more information about Pyramid serving sizes, contact the state Department of Health Nutrition Branch 586-4671 or the Food Science and Human Nutrition Cooperative Extension Office 956-8161.

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