

Living Well with Diabetes

Estimating Portion Sizes

In your own kitchen it's easy to control portions using your scale and measuring cups and spoons. But it's also easy to estimate portion sizes by using the size of different, familiar objects such as an average woman's hand (men may need to estimate down a little bit). A closed fist is about the size of 1 cup. Therefore, a fist-size portion of pasta or potato would be equal to 2 carbs (1/2 cup of cooked pasta or potato equals 1 carbohydrate choice); one fist-size portion of cooked rice would be equal to 3 carbs (1/3 cup cooked rice equals 1 carbohydrate choice). A fist-sized portion of strawberries would be equal to 1 carb (1 cup of strawberries equals 1 carbohydrate choice), and so forth. A fist-sized portion of salad greens would be 1 cup or 1 serving (vegetable).

Your thumb is about one ounce of cheese or one tablespoon of salad dressing or peanut butter. Your thumb tip is about one teaspoon—use this for determining the size of fats, such as butter, margarine, mayonnaise, or oil.

You can also use inanimate objects to estimate serving portions. A serving of cereal is not whatever fits in your cereal bowl—1 ounce of cereal (1 serving) is the size of a tennis ball. A computer mouse is the size of a medium 5-ounce (150 g) potato that's equivalent to 2 carbs, and a small bar of soap is the size of a 3 to 4 (90 to 120 g) ounce serving of chicken,

fish, or meat. If your meal plan calls for 1 ounce of cheese, that's the size of four dice. If you're eating spaghetti, 1 serving (1/2 cup or 1 carb) portion would be about 32 noodles. A hockey puck is about the size of a 3-ounce (90 g) bagel (1 serving or 1 carbohydrate).

Since most Americans grossly overestimate a normal serving size, it's especially important for those of us with diabetes to be realistic and learn how to control our portion sizes. Our colleagues at the Joslin Diabetes Center in Boston and their affiliates around the country demand that any patient who is newly diagnosed with diabetes weigh or measure every portion for the first several months until they innately learn how to estimate by sight. Once they've proven that they can indeed spoon out exactly 1/3 cup of rice, 1/2 cup of pasta, 1 cup of strawberries, or a 3-ounce serving of chicken or fish by sight alone, only then may they not weigh or measure at every meal.

Be wary when eating out at a restaurant. Split an entree with someone else or ask the waiter to put half the entree in a doggie bag before you even touch it. Most restaurants serve 8- to 10-ounce (240 to 300 g) entree portions at dinner, unless otherwise specified on the menu. At lunch, it's usually a 4- to 6-ounce (120 to 180 g) portion.