Supersize Everything: America's Massive Weight Gain

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Imagine this: It is a Friday night, you are going out to dinner with family, and you order a delicious pasta. You receive a large bowl filled with pasta, a breadstick, and a salad on the side. Seems like a lot of food for just one person, right? That is because it is a lot, but that is today's reality in the United States of America. When someone is buying food from places like a dine-in restaurant, a gas station, or a fast-food joint, they are often getting much more than just one person needs in a single sitting. For example, my favorite restaurant has an amazing, "twisted mac and cheese", and if I am hungry enough, I may finish the whole thing. But when I started tracking my nutrition, I decided to check the website for how many calories it contained, and I was blown away. According to Boston's website, their macaroni and cheese is approximately 1,300 calories, and there are other dishes reaching almost 2,000 calories! Unfortunately, that is a normal occurrence now in 2023. The portion sizes here have become very unhealthy, but most people don't realize that unless they investigate it themselves. The problem is, Americans have become accustomed to the large portion sizes. I can imagine that if the government were to start regulating portion sizes, many people would be dissatisfied with that. Most would argue that the portion sizes in America are just one example of our freedom to do as we want. The "American way" is bigger and better. Not even figuratively, almost everything in the United States is bigger: the food, the drinks, but also, the children. While I can agree that it is nice being able to enjoy a large soda every so often, it is not healthy long-term. Americans would benefit tremendously if the portion sizes were decreased back to what they were 30 plus years ago. Smaller portion sizes will help combat obesity, heart disease, and other serious conditions like type 2 diabetes.

Additionally, it would help lower the cost of food and beverages as well, because less food equals less money.

Most people do not realize how frequent overconsumption is. Portion sizes have been increasing drastically over the past several decades. But before I continue, I believe it is important to explain what portion sizes are. According to Esther Ellis, a licensed and registered dietitian nutritionist (2018), portion sizes and serving sizes are quite different. A portion is a given amount of food someone consumes at once, as opposed to a serving, which is usually an exact measurement, and it is the recommended amount to eat. For instance, a 20-ounce bottle of Coca-Cola is one portion, but it is made up of roughly 1.5 servings. The thing is, serving sizes have also increased over time. A single serving of soda used to be eight ounces, but now it is 12 ounces. The FDA (2022) states, "Serving sizes have been updated to reflect the amount people typically eat and drink today". This has become an issue because as serving sizes increase, people will believe they are consuming the healthy, recommended amount, when decades ago it was considered too much. That isn't all, though. When people don't understand the difference between a portion and a serving, they may assume it is the same thing, and may read a nutrition label incorrectly. This can lead to unintentional overconsumption because someone may look at the nutrition facts and assume they are consuming the number of calories, carbs, and sodium listed, but since the product contains multiple servings, they are actually eating double or even sometimes triple the calories listed.

Americans love having the ability to consume as much as they please, so decreasing portion and/or serving sizes would restrict that and cause a lot of anger. However, obesity rates are at an all-time high, especially in children, and we need a solution. Eating habits start early, and children do not need to consume quite as much calories as a full-grown adult. When parents

feed their children the same amount as they feed themselves, they are increasing the risk that their child may become overweight or obese. Especially adults who are already overweight or obese themselves, they likely consume large quantities, and in turn their children will have the same fate. Based on statistics from the CDC (2022), the current childhood obesity rate is 19.7%, and the obesity prevalence for adults is 41.9%. These percentages are continuing to climb, and soon, half of the adult population in the United States will be classified as obese. This is alarming because of the wide array of health issues that obesity causes, which I will dive into later. The fact is larger portion sizes lead to more calories consumed, and the number of calories being consumed has a direct influence on a person's weight. When people are consuming more than they need, they are gaining more weight, which then leads to obesity.

Childhood obesity ultimately leads to adulthood obesity, so giving children "normal" portion sizes is too much for them. Most, if not all, restaurants and fast-food places offer kids' meals, but their kids' meals often contain the number of calories recommended for an adult meal. That is where the United States is at right now. An adult can get away with eating a kids' meal and being satisfied. Renee Jacques, who is an associate viral content editor for the Huffington Post, (2017) says regarding McDonald's Happy Meals that "the meals still round out to about 600 calories, which experts say is way too much for small children". To put into perspective, a 600-calorie meal is considered average for an adult. Kids should not be consuming that many calories in one single meal and eating that many calories at such a young age will continue unhealthy eating habits into adulthood. When even the kid's portions are too much for kids, it's no wonder the obesity rates in America are so high compared to the rest of the world.

While eating a couple extra servings here and there isn't harmful to one's health, consistently eating larger portions over time directly leads to excess weight gain. Everybody has

what is called maintenance calories, the number of calories one should consume in a day in order to maintain their current weight, which is based on someone's height, weight, and daily activity level. When it is broken down, weight gain and weight loss is very simple. When someone eats more than their maintenance calories, they will gain weight, and if they eat less, they will lose weight. Elizabeth Millard at *Runner's World* (2021) claims, "Eating 1,000 extra calories a day over the course of a month was linked to a fat-mass increase of about 3 pounds, as well as increases in blood sugar." Therefore, if someone eats 1,000 calories over their maintenance daily, they will gain approximately 36 pounds in one year, and in only five years, that adds up to 180 extra pounds. That is frightening considering chronic overeating is not difficult to do when portion sizes are as big as they are today.

Even though many Americans do not see a problem with it, obesity is extremely dangerous. It leads to numerous health implications that eventually become deadly. The list goes on, but a few of the main health issues associated with obesity are heart disease, lung disease, cancer, and type 2 diabetes. Harvard T.H. Chan (2023) states that "excess weight, especially obesity, diminishes almost every aspect of health, from reproductive and respiratory function to memory and mood. Obesity increases the risk of several debilitating, and deadly diseases, including diabetes, heart disease, and some cancers". The severe health conditions that result from obesity are not worth having a larger coke or eating more french fries. People with obesity are at significantly higher risk of early death due to underlying health issues associated with it. Heart and respiratory problems are very common and if not treated by a lifestyle change, they will cause death.

The reason that obesity is more common in the United States than say Europe is because of the differing portion sizes. For example, France has one of the lowest obesity rates in the

world, and their eating habits have a lot to do with that. According to NDTV (2016), "The French tend to eat less of everything because they are served smaller portions in restaurants unlike other American cafes where unlimited or bottomless is the rule". While some may worry that eating less than what they are used to will make them go hungry, it is important to consider the success other countries have with consuming less. Additionally, it is all about the quality of food that is being consumed. For instance, whole foods contain less calories but are more filling than processed fatty foods. So, people can eat less while still getting everything their bodies need. One of the reasons France is so successful with eating less is because the plates are smaller, so they physically cannot eat portions has big as in the US. The large plate and bowl sizes in the United States leads to portion distortion, because we tend to fill our plates up, and attempt to eat everything on it. It is also common for Americans to eat past fullness, where in Europe, they eat slower and only until they are satisfied. Countries like France are benefiting greatly due to having smaller portion sizes. Along with healthier eating habits, France has healthier citizens. Their obesity rate is significantly smaller than the obesity rate in the United States, which also means that the overall health in France is much better than that in America.

Although Americans are used to having full control of the amount of food they consume, it has become a dangerous health epidemic, and misleading packaging helps exacerbate the issue. When people believe they are consuming less than they actually are, it can lead to unintentional weight gain and detrimental long-term effects. Decreasing portions sizes will overall help improve the health of Americans. Deadly diseases such as heart and lung disease and diabetes are a huge threat to obese people, and providing countless calories only makes things worse. Cutting the issue off at the source may help to prevent childhood and adult obesity, and help people develop healthier eating habits. This is an important issue because I've seen first-hand

what obesity does to a person, and how much it affects their quality of life. It is hard to watch someone struggle with it, and I can only imagine how much harder it is to personally deal with. It is unlikely that portion sizes all around the United States will become smaller, especially since people can just buy and choose to consume more, but educating people on proper nutrition can help them learn to be conscious consumers. Hopefully Americans can see a day where they no longer need to choose between overeating or wasting the food they paid for.

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