



NATIONAL NUTRITION WEEK 2014: “Choose your portion with caution!”

September 2014

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. When did nutrition week originate?

National Nutrition Week (NNW) started in the 1990s when the Department of Health was approached by the Association for Dietetics in South Africa (ADSA). It was agreed that it was important for nutrition messages to be included in the Department of Health Calendar. World Food Day is recognized on the 16th October, and Nutrition Week in the week preceding this, namely from 9 to 15 October.

2. What is the objective of NNW 2014?

The objective of NNW 2014 is to build on the theme of NNW 2013 “Choose your portion with caution” by strengthening awareness and giving information to communities about the importance of portion control, i.e. eating healthily by choosing a variety of foods in the right amounts. Tools will be shared with consumers on how to choose their portions correctly.

3. Why is portion control so important?

The increase in obesity over the past few decades in the world has been accompanied by an increase in food portion sizes, which includes an increase in energy intake. This is called portion distortion or super sizing because people are eating more than they should without even realizing it. South Africa too is following this worldwide trend of increase in overweight and obesity in all age groups.

In addition to portion distortion, many South Africans also eat too little of certain food groups, such as vegetables, fruit and legumes. In other words, people oversize their portion of starchy foods, fat, meat or chicken or fish and undersize their portion of vegetables, fruit and legumes. Awareness of portion size for each of the different food groups is important to show how much should be eaten.

4. What contributes to portion distortion?

Several factors lead to portion distortion,



- (a) Not eating the right amounts from a variety of foods;
- (b) Frequently eating out at restaurants and buying fast foods and beverages that have bigger than normal portion sizes, especially the 'value for money meals';
- (c) Eating snacks that are packaged in bigger than normal portion sizes;
- (d) Using larger plates and containers to serve food and beverages;
- (e) Serving food at the table, instead of serving the right amounts on the plates before carrying it to the table.
- (f) Eating until fullness instead of just until satisfaction.

5. What are the health consequences of portion distortion?

Bigger portions lead to a higher energy intake, which in turn leads to overweight and obesity. Obesity increases one's risk of developing high blood pressure, strokes, diabetes, heart disease and certain cancers. Furthermore, bigger portions also lead to a higher salt/sodium intake, which further increases the risk of developing high blood pressure, heart disease and strokes.

Consuming bigger portions of certain types of food such as take-away foods can take the place of healthier foods, which can lead to inadequate intake of essential nutrients for growth and health. This type of eating plan contains too much energy and too little micronutrients that can be obtained from legumes, fruits, vegetables and dairy.

6. How can one avoid portion distortion/supersizing?

There are two guiding principles that one should follow eat healthily namely (a) follow the guidelines for healthy eating by eating a variety of nutritious foods from different food groups and (b) by not overeating.

7. What are the guidelines for healthy eating?

The Guidelines for Healthy Eating are a set of guidelines that have been developed by nutrition experts in the country. The guidelines for healthy eating for persons 5 years and older are the following:

- Enjoy a variety of foods:
- Make starchy foods part of most meals;
- Eat plenty of vegetables and fruit every day;



- Eat dry beans, split peas, lentils and soya regularly.
- Fish, chicken, lean meat or eggs could be eaten daily;
- Have milk, maas or yoghurt every day;
- Use fat sparingly; choose vegetable oils rather than hard fats;
- Use salt and food high in salt sparingly;
- Use sugar and food and drinks high in sugar sparingly;
- Drink lots of clean, safe water
- Be active

8. Including starchy food is one of the guidelines and yet it is claimed that carbohydrates contribute to overweight and obesity and that low-carbohydrate diets are more effective for weight loss than a balanced energy-controlled diet

Eating large portions of food, irrespective of whether our diet contains high or low carbohydrates means eating too much energy. We gain weight if we eat more energy than our bodies need, especially if we are physically inactive.

The scientific evidence indicates that the weight loss achieved by low carbohydrate diets is because of lower energy intake, and not specifically due to low carbohydrate intake. In fact, weight loss with recommended balanced diets is similar to weight loss with low carbohydrate diets.

These diets often do not contain sufficient dietary fibre and other important micronutrients needed for health. The potential long-term effects may include negative changes in blood cholesterol levels (resulting in an increased risk of cardiovascular disease) and negative effects on bone health.

Carbohydrates from starchy foods, vegetables, fruit and legumes fuel your body and important organs like the brain. There is not enough evidence to limit the intake of starchy grains and cereals, (specifically whole grain or minimally processed grains) in the diets of both children and adults.

9. How much should one eat from the different food groups as outlined in the Guidelines for Healthy Eating?

The amount of food a person needs per day from each of the food groups as outlined in the Guidelines for Healthy Eating varies according to a person's age, gender and level of activity. A



food guide has been developed as a visual tool to support the guidelines, by illustrating the foods that are most commonly eaten in the country. The different 'food groups' are represented as different sized circles. Salt and sugar are not shown on the guide as these are not part of a healthy eating plan. The size of the circle should guide you when it comes to portion size. We can see that we should for instance eat large amounts of vegetables and fruit but use fats sparingly.

10. Is there any guide one could use to estimate portion size if one does not have tools to measure or weigh food?

The ideal way to make sure that one eats the right portion of food is to measure or weigh the food. Unfortunately this is not always practical. An easy way to give one an estimate of portion size is to use your hand. Obviously this will give a rough estimate and the accuracy will vary based on one's age, gender and hand size, but it is a useful guide. For instance:

- A fistful is equal to one cup and can be used to estimate the portion size for cooked pap, rice, samp, pasta or fruit;
- The size of the palm of the hand can be used to estimate the portion size for meat, fish or chicken;
- Two open handfuls can be used to estimate the portion size for vegetables;
- One open handful can be used to estimate the portion size for cooked beans/split peas/lentils or nuts or raisins;
- The tip of the thumb is equivalent to one teaspoon and can be used to estimate the portion size for all oils, margarine or mayonnaise;
- The size of the thumb can also be used to estimate the portion size for peanut butter or hard cheese.

11. What tips do you have to make sure people do not supersize their portions?

- (a) Try to include foods from at least two food groups in a meal and aim to include at least four different food groups per day;
- (b) Ideally, measure or weigh the allowed portion size for that meal. Do this before sitting down at the table;
- (c) If it is not possible to measure or weight the food, try to estimate the portion size by using the size of your hand;



- (d) Use smaller plates, containers, utensils, glasses and mugs that will make it look 'fuller';
- (e) Stick to regular meal times – breakfast, lunch and dinner with snacks in between;
- (f) When eating out, share large portions with a friend or request a 'doggie bag' for the amount that exceeds the required portion for that meal;
- (g) When eating or snacking in front of the TV, put a small amount in a bowl or container and put away the rest;
- (h) Eat a piece of fruit or small salad if you feel hungry between meals to avoid overeating during meals.
- (i) Before grabbing a snack, ask yourself if you're truly hungry or if you're reacting to your thirst, emotions or eating out of habit. Eat less by not using food to cope or to distract you.
- (j) Store leftovers such as casseroles or pasta, in individually sized containers – that way when you decide to re-heat, the portion is just enough for one.

12. Where can one get more information about eating healthy and portion control?

- www.nutritionweek.co.za;
- The Department of Health: www.health.gov.za; Telephone numbers:
 - National: 012 - 395 8770
 - Western Cape: 021 - 583 5663/2275
 - Eastern Cape: 040 - 628 1705
 - Northern Cape: 053 - 830 0551
 - KwaZulu-Natal: 033 - 395 2326
 - Free State 051 - 408 1281/1896
 - Gauteng 011 - 355 3314
 - North West 018 - 397 2361
 - Mpumalanga 013 - 766 3413
 - Limpopo 015 - 293 6198
- The Association for Dietetics in South Africa (ADSA): www.adsa.org.za; Telephone: 011 - 061 5000;
- The Heart and Stroke Foundation: www.heartfoundation.co.za; Heart and Stroke Health Line: 0860 1 HEART (43278);
- Consumer Education Project Milk South Africa: www.milksa.co.za; Telephone: 012 - 991 4164.