



Photo courtesy of Columbus Children's Hospital

Lori Mooney, Columbus Children's registered dietitian, demonstrates that a proper portion of pasta should be no larger than the size of a fist or a baseball.

Portion sizes – A growing problem

After years of poor food choices, 15-year-old Samantha decided she needed to make a change.

"I used to eat all junk food," Samantha said. But after seeking help to lose weight, Samantha discovered that paying attention to portion size is as equally important as choosing the right types of foods. In fact, eating larger-than-necessary portions adds up quickly. Just 100 extra calories a day can lead to a 10-pound weight gain in one year.

"When we work with young people and their families, they're often surprised to learn that many of the portions they receive in restaurants, bakeries and even at home are several times larger than they should be eating," said Lori Mooney, a registered dietitian at Columbus Children's Hospital's Center for Healthy Weight and Nutrition.

With today's large portion sizes considered the norm, it becomes easy to inadvertently eat several servings.

It's hard to stomach, but in many cases, Mooney said cookies are now almost seven times the suggested serving size; muffins weigh three times as much as suggested; bagels have grown from 2 to 5 ounces; soda has gone from 8 to 20 ounces; and servings of cooked pasta are as many as five times the recommended portion.

The center's dietitians teach children and teenagers simple techniques to judge just how much food should go on their plates. For example, Mooney recommends using your hands to estimate portion sizes. A serving of pasta or potatoes should not exceed the size of your fist or a baseball. A portion of meat should be about the same size and thickness as the palm of your hand or a deck of playing cards.

Mooney said many families never even consider portion sizes when they fill their

plates. Once they do, they realize they are often eating several times the quantities they should be consuming. Now that Samantha has learned about proper portion sizes, she tries to keep them in mind while eating.

"The last time I had a steak, I actually held out my palm and compared the size, and that's how much I ate," she said.

When preparing a plate, Mooney recommends filling half of it with fruits and vegetables, one-quarter with meat, and the remaining quarter with pasta, bread or rice. Keep in mind that plates are getting bigger, too. An appropriately sized plate is nine-and-a-half inches.

For on-the-go families, quick dinners often include eating out or fast food. Mooney recognizes that many times eating out is unavoidable, so she recommends sharing entrees or opting for smaller sizes. If you order too much food, ask for a box to take home.

Mooney stresses that if you do overeat on occasion, don't give up. Instead, think about what you can do the next day to make up for the slip.

"The key is that if you blow it once, you have to get back on that wagon. It's a lifelong choice," Mooney said.

Because portion control is a difficult but positive life change, it's vital that families work on developing portion control skills together.

"It's important not to say, 'He's the one with the problem, not me.' By working together as a family, you create a strong support base and a larger chance for success," Mooney said.