

U.S. Food Consumption and Obesity, Part 1 of 2

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When I ask patients from abroad about the United States, they invariably comment on the amount of overweight people and the huge portions of food we serve. What is considered small by our standards is quite large in many other parts of the world.

In developed nations, especially in the U.S., obesity has increased at an alarming rate in the past decade. In their book, *Advanced Human Nutrition*, Wildman and Medeiros¹ state that consumption surveys (in particular, the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey - NHANES) indicate that the amount of daily calories consumed by Americans has slightly decreased in the previous decade. This theme is echoed in many popular weight-loss books currently on the market; however, it is an idea that yours truly has found difficult to swallow.

Era	Description	Size	Calories Per Serving
1950s	one size	regular	200
1970s	Regular fries are now small	new large	320
1980s	Large is now regular	new large	400
1990s	Large is now 450 calories	new super-size	540
2000s	Super-size is now large	new super-size	610
<i>The growth of McDonald's French fries.</i>			

It is generally accepted that large population surveys tend to have large margins of error.² It is also accepted that serving sizes have continued to increase. Take, for example, French fries from America's leading fast-food restaurant.

Most people do not realize that when they order a Big Mac, medium fries and a medium drink, they are about to consume 1,250 calories, including 56 grams of fat and 1,380 milligrams of sodium.³

When a person requests a super-size soft drink and fries, the calories total 1,610.³ (This does not count the ketchup used on the fries.) Across the street at Burger King, a regular Whopper without cheese, a medium soda and medium fries contains 1,270 calories and 57 grams of fat;³ make it a double Whopper with cheese, large fries and a large drink, and the totals are a whopping (no pun intended) 2,050 calories, 95 grams of fat and 2,600 milligrams of sodium!³

Disappearance Data

Estimating food consumption by food disappearance statistics is accomplished as follows: Production is added to beginning stocks and total imports, and farm use, industrial use, exports,

and ending stocks are subtracted. Disappearance data includes spoilage, spillage and waste. Thus, the actual amounts people consume are less. One lengthy USDA document⁴ includes in-depth disappearance data statistics on the types and amounts of food consumed from 1970 to 1997 in the United States. Also included is a macronutrient breakdown of daily disappearance levels (per person) of protein, carbohydrate, fat and calories. These statistics are available from 1970 to 1994. These data can be easily compared and contrasted using the tables below. My next article will contain more tables, and go into greater detail on the specific types, categories and kinds of food that have been "disappearing" in the United States.

Year	Protein	Carbohydrates	Fat
1970	95	386	154
1980	96	406	153
1990	105	458	156
1994	110	491	159
<i>Macronutrients consumed (grams per person per day).</i>			

Year	Protein	Carbohydrates	Fat
1970	11.4%	46.6%	41.8%
1980	11.3%	47.9%	40.6%
1990	11.5%	50.1%	38.4%
1994	11.5%	51.2%	37.3%
<i>Caloric consumption (percentage per person per day).</i>			

Year	Calories	<i>Total calories per person per day (based on disappearance data).</i>
1970	3,310	
1980	3,385	
1990	3,656	
1994	3,835	

References

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3. Jacobson MS, Hurley JG. *Restaurant Confidential*. New York: Center for Science in the Public Interest, Workman Publishing Company, 2002.
4. Putnam JJ, and Allshouse JE. *Food Consumption, Prices, and Expenditures 1970-97*. Food and Rural Economics Division, Economics Research Service, United States Department of Agriculture 1990, Statistical Bulletin no. 965.

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