

**NATIONAL NUTRITION WEEK 2013:  
“Eat less - Choose your portion with caution!”**

August 2013

**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 16<sup>th</sup> October, and Nutrition Week in the week preceding this, namely from 9 to 15 October.

2. What is the objective of NNW 2013?

The objective of NNW 2013 is to create awareness and educate communities about the importance of portion control, i.e. eating healthily by choosing a variety of foods in the right amounts. This includes foods from some groups that should be eaten in large portions and others that should be eaten in moderation or sparingly.

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.

Unfortunately many South Africans also eat too little of certain food groups, Awareness of portion size in these instances is to demonstrate how much should be eaten in comparison to usual intake.

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 you eat healthy portion sizes?

There are two guiding principles that one should follow to have a healthy eating pattern, namely (a) eat a variety of nutritious foods from different groups and (b) eat the right amounts of these foods.

7. What is meant by eating a variety of foods?

The food groups that should be included are listed in the guidelines below, and are illustrated in the food guide. You should eat food from at least four food groups each day, and use different options on different days.

- 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.

- Drink lots of clean, safe water
- Be active

8. How can one remember all these messages?

A food guide has been developed as a visual tool to support these messages for eating healthily, by illustrating the foods that are most commonly eaten in the country. The different 'food groups' are represented as different sized circles. 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.

9. Why are salt and sugar not represented on the food guide?

Salt and foods high in sodium should be eaten sparingly because a high salt intake increases blood pressure. One should also read the nutrition labels of the products you buy and avoid foods that are high in sodium.

Sugar is not an essential part of a healthy eating plan. Sugar intake, even at low levels, can cause tooth decay when it is taken slowly between meals, such as sucking sweets, or when it is used often between meals; this is especially true when one is not practicing good oral hygiene and when they are not using fluoridated toothpaste. Sugary foods and drinks are also high in energy (kilojoules), and if eaten in excess can lead to weight gain.

10. Salt should be used sparingly, yet it is recommended as a source of iodine to prevent iodine deficiency disorders. Why is this?

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) a person only needs a teaspoon of iodine over a lifetime to prevent iodine deficiency disorders. People should therefore use salt sparingly, but they should make sure the salt they use is iodated. Salt-water fish and seafood are also good sources of iodine.

11. How would one know how much to eat from a food group?

The food guide does not show the amounts of a particular food group needed. This information is found in supporting documentation. The amount of food a person needs from each of the food groups (number of food guide units) varies depending on age, gender and level of activity. The amount of food from a food group in the Food Guide (food guide unit) is calculated based on the

nutritional value of the food. A single unit of each food in a food group provides a similar amount of nutrients as other units in that same group (e.g. 1 slice of bread vs. ½ cup of cooked porridge). The unit sizes of different foods are described in different ways, for example 1 slice of bread (starchy food), 1 apple (vegetables and fruit) or 1 cup of milk (milk group).

12. How does a food unit differ from a portion?

A food unit should not be confused with portion; a single portion of food may have one or more units (food guide units) that are eaten at one time. Members of the same family may have different portion sizes for example, a teenage boy may have 6 slices of bread in his school food box to have at first break, and his portion is six units or six slices. His mother may take two slices to work to eat at lunchtime, her portion is two slices. In other words, the portion sizes between family members may differ, but the food guide unit size for a particular food must remain the same (in this example one food guide unit is one slice of bread).

13. I have noticed that starchy foods are represented by the biggest circle, yet people say one should limit intake of carbohydrates?

Carbohydrates that your body gets from starchy foods fuel your body and important organs like the brain. There is insufficient 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.

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. 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 affects to bone health.

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

- (a) Draw up an eating plan for each day with the correct portion size that is based on the recommended number of food units from each group according to age, gender and activity level
- (b) Measure or weigh the allowed portion size for that meal. Do this before sitting down at the table;
- (c) Use smaller plates, containers, utensils, glasses and mugs that will make it look 'fuller';
- (d) Stick to regular meal times;

- (e) 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;
- (f) When eating or snacking in front of the TV, put a small amount in a bowl or container and put away the rest;
- (g) Eat a piece of fruit or small salad if you feel hungry between meals to avoid overeating during meals.
- (h) 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.
- (i) 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.

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

[www.nutritionweek.co.za](http://www.nutritionweek.co.za);

The Department of Health: [www.doh.gov.za](http://www.doh.gov.za);

The Association for Dietetics in South Africa (ADSA): [www.adsa.org.za](http://www.adsa.org.za);

The Heart and Stroke Foundation: [www.heartfoundation.co.za](http://www.heartfoundation.co.za);

Consumer Education Project Milk South Africa: [www.milk.co.za](http://www.milk.co.za)