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The breads, cereals and potato food group: perceptions of average portions in Ireland

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Current healthy eating guidelines recommend at least six servings from the breads, cereals and potato group of the food pyramid, depending on energy requirements (age, gender and activity levels)⁽¹⁾. However, there is evidence that the rise in obesity is occurring in parallel with consumption of larger portion sizes⁽²⁾. Differences in size between portions that are normally consumed and those that are recommended may confuse individuals who are attempting to follow healthy eating guidelines. The aim of the present study was to determine 'what makes the most sense' to consumers in terms of 'average portion size' for foods within the breads, cereals and potato group.

A standardised questionnaire designed to assess preferences and understanding of portion size was administered to 1011 respondents surveyed at two large Dublin supermarkets. Two food displays were created as a visual aid to help respondents provide answers to the questionnaire: one contained smaller portion sizes, based on Irish and UK portion sizes data⁽³⁾; the other contained larger portions of the same foods modelled on Australian portion sizes⁽⁴⁾. The energy content ranged between 293 and 523 kJ (70 and 125 kcal) for the smaller display and between 460 and 912 kJ (110 and 218 kcal) for the larger display.

The two supermarkets represented both an advantaged and a disadvantaged socio-economic area. A wide range of adult age groups were surveyed and 72% were female. SPSS (version 14.0; SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA) was used to analyse the data (χ^2).

	Smaller size		Larger size		Do not know	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Total sample	222	22.0	745	73.7	44	4.4
Supermarket A	130	23.1	411	73.1	21	3.7
Supermarket B	92	20.5	334	74.4	23	5.1
Male	199	27.3	496	68.1	33	4.5
Female	23	8.1	249	88.0	11	3.9
<18 years	2	25.0	6	75.0	0	0
18–30 years	40	20.8	141	73.4	11	5.7
31–50 years	75	16.8	354	79.4	17	3.8
51–70 years	75	26.6	194	68.8	13	4.6
>71 years	28	37.3	45	60.0	2	2.7

Significant differences between subgroups: genders, $P < 0.001$; age groups, $P < 0.01$; supermarkets, NS.

Approximately 75% of shoppers stated that the larger portions were 'the best fit with their idea of average'. This trend was similar for all subgroups, although more men preferred larger portions ($P < 0.001$) and more of those aged 50 years favoured smaller portions ($P < 0.01$). Approximately 60% of respondents would like to change the portion sizes of some foods they chose as being closest to their overall idea of 'average'. Larger portions were favoured for breakfast cereals, soda and batch bread and rice and pasta, while smaller portions were preferred for mashed potato.

Recommended portion sizes within this food group should be enlarged to be more meaningful. However, in light of the rise in obesity, the energy content should be kept within as narrow a range as possible. Awareness of portion size will most likely involve considerable consumer education.

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1. Health Service Executive (2007) *Guide to Daily Health Food Choices*. Ireland: Health Services Executive.
2. Rolls BJ, Morris EJ & Roe LS (2002) *Am J Clin Nutr* **76**, 1207–1213.
3. Food Standards Agency (2006) *Food Portion Sizes*, 3rd ed. London: H. M. Stationery Office.
4. Department of Health and Ageing (2003) *The Australian Guide to Healthy Eating*. Canberra, Australia: Australian Government, Department of Health and Ageing.