



Super Size Me

Confusion over serving sizes may mean some portions are less than controlled

One of the most misunderstood areas of Canada's new mandatory nutrition labelling regulations involves serving sizes. It comes into question every time a nutrition facts table for a food label is formatted. The question of what the serving size should be is not always that complicated either. However, contributing to the confusion over serving sizes is the new reference amounts for foods which are themselves mistaken for serving sizes because they are generally "typical" amounts consumed in a single eating occasion.

Contributing to this confusion is the fact that in the U.S. there are also reference amounts for foods, albeit different in many cases, which are used to direct manufacturers in determining a serving size. In Canada, reference amounts play a more casual role as it relates to serving sizes with regard to multiple serving containers, but a more intimate role in the case of single-serving containers. They also play a significant role in nutrient content claims, as the criteria for many, but not all, claims are based on both the reference amount (RA) and the serving of stated sizes (which may be different). Since they have a direct relationship with meeting the criteria of nutrient content claims, they indirectly have an affect on rounding certain nutrients to "0." This is because rounding rules for nutrients such as fat, saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol and sodium are married to meeting the claims criteria for "free" of that nutrient. In a philosophical way then RAs are to us like the social conscience of Jiminy Cricket is to Pinocchio – they keep us honest.

A serving of stated size is defined in the *Food and Drug Regulations*, which by purposely lacking an explicit definition places the labeller in the position of determining the amount of serving size for their food. The serving size is at a minimum based on the food as sold, not as prepared. If the amount is not reasonable for an average person at a single eating occasion, it could be considered misleading. Thus the matter of selecting a serving size should not be an arbitrary process. It requires careful consideration related to the food, its density and other factors that may influence how it is consumed. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency, in its 2003 *Guide to Food Labelling and Advertising* (2003 GTFLA), has

consolidated the RAs with the range of serving sizes they would normally expect. These ranges are not codified in the regulations, but are provided for our convenience. A reasonable serving size would, with some exceptions, be in the range provided. For example, carbonated beverages equal 250 to 375 mL.

In the case of a single-serving container the definition of a serving of stated size is more explicit. Essentially a serving of stated size would be the container (the net quantity of the food in the package), where one of the following three conditions applies: the quantity of food can reasonably be consumed by one person at a single eating occasion; the RA of the food is less than 100 g or 100 mL and the package contains less than 200 per cent of that RA; or the RA of the food is 100 g or 100 mL or more and the package contains 150 per cent or less of that RA.

For example, a reasonable serving size for a two-litre container of soda would be 250 mL. The RA is 355 mL, which is classically the volume of a can. Based on the definition of a serving size a 500-mL container of soda would be within the 150 per cent of the RA as listed above. Therefore, in this case the 500-mL container is one serving, not two. The 500-mL serving would be 125 mL beyond the upper limit of the serving-size range expressed in the 2003 GTFLA. You've just been super-sized by the regulations, but not by choice!

Considering that current dietary recommendations encourage moderation and making smarter choices about portion sizes, this does seem to be contradictory. Perhaps Health Canada should consider changes to the single-serving rules, even going so far as to put the onus on the labeller to determine whether a container is a single serving or not. After all, if we are deemed to be capable of determining a serving size in one case we should be in the other as well. Let the RA guide our conscience through their indirect role in the rounding of nutrients.

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