



Finding the balance: Meal Maths

It is very easy to get into bad habits with food. As parents we feel like we have to provide a cooked meal for our child in the evening, but often they have already had a cooked meal and pudding in school. But when you consider that a child's stomach is roughly the size of their own clenched fist, you can see that two large cooked meals in one day may be too much for their digestive system to comfortably manage. Overeating causes the stomach to stretch beyond its normal and the expanded stomach pushes against other organs, making them feel uncomfortable. This can present as feeling tired, sluggish or drowsy and it makes it hard for them to concentrate or to want to be physically active. If they eat like this often it will lead to weight gain over time.

This is where meal maths can help! The idea is simple if you have a heavy meal at lunchtime try having a lighter meal for dinner and vice versa.

1. This is a happy tummy day, the child has had a healthy balanced breakfast, lunch and snacks and a treat tea. Because the child has had a lighter lunch and healthier snacks their tummy is not overloaded and they feel full but not bloated or sick.



2. Today this tummy is feeling a bit poorly. The day started well with a healthy breakfast and snack but then they had a heavy lunch and dinner and chose a less healthy sugary snack making the tummy feel uncomfortably full and heavy.







3. Today this tummy is sick. The child has had big heavy meals with a lot of sugar and fat all day which their digestive system is struggling to process. As a result the child feels uncomfortable and sick. Eating like this often could lead to weight gain and constipation.



So we know that big meals and over eating can cause sore tummies, but how do we know what size is the right size?

A simple measure we can use to estimate portion size is our hands! This measure makes a lot of sense as a child's hand is the same size as their tummy!

Symbol	Equivalent	Food
	Fist	Rice, Pasta , Fruit and Vegetables
	Palm	Meat, Fish, Poultry
	Cupped Palm	Nuts, Dried Fruits
	Double Cupped Palm	Leafy Vegetables, Crisps, Popcorn
	Thumb	Hard Cheese, Nut Butters
	Thumb Tip	Butter, Mayonnaise, Oil, Sugar






The image on the left shows you which parts of the hand to use for which food group.

This measure can be used when plating up your family's meals to help make sure everyone at the table gets the right sized portion for their tummy.

This is not an exact measure and a child may want to eat more or less. Always start with a portion that fits the hand measuring guide even if it is smaller than you think they need or their usual portion. If the child is still hungry. They can always ask for more when they have finished their portion.

The table on the right details how many portions of each food we should aim for in a day. Use this to help you plan your meals and snacks to ensure your family are getting all the right nutrients while still planning in some treats!

For more information about how to include treats into a healthy lifestyle can be found in our [80/20 Approach](#) factsheet.

	At least 5 portions of fruit and vegetables	5+
	3-4 portions of starchy foods	3-4
	2-3 portions of protein foods	2-3
	2-3 portions of dairy/alternatives	2-3
	Small amounts of unsaturated oils and spreads	SMALL AMOUNT

References:

Get Portion Wise- <https://www.nutrition.org.uk/putting-it-into-practice/balancing-the-diet/get-portion-wise/>

What is my Portion Size?- https://healthygibraltar.org/campaigns/healthy-eating/what-is-my-portion-size/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=what-is-my-portion-size

What Happens When We Overeat-

<https://www.mdanderson.org/publications/focused-on-health/What-happens-when-you-overeat.h23Z1592202.html>