

Practice Points

The myth of moderation: Do all foods really fit?

By Jeff Novick, MS, RD



When it comes to eating, you know what they always say: "everything in moderation."

Whether it is chocolate, wine, red meat, or dessert, nothing is bad in and of itself, as long as we just don't consume too much of it. But, how do we define "too much" and how do we know if we have surpassed this?

Our current concept of "everything in moderation" comes from ancient Greece, where at the temple of Apollo at Delphi there was the inscription, "Meden Agan" or "Nothing in Excess." From this, we got the concept of doing something "in moderation," which means not doing it excessively. Therefore, someone who moderates their food consumption may choose to eat food from all food groups, but limit their intake of the foods that seem to cause deleterious effects.

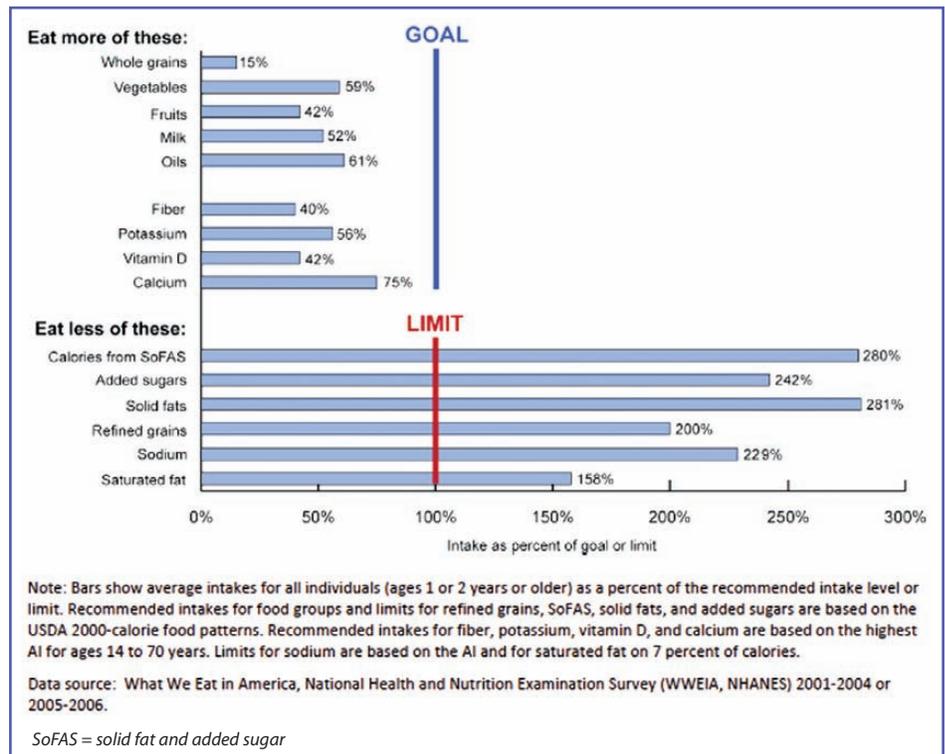
So, how are we doing in this area?

The items we know that are causing harm to Americans right now are the excess consumption of added sugars, refined grains, sodium, fat, and saturated fat. The latest data show that Americans are consuming (1-2) (See figure 1):

- Added sugars – 242% over the recommended upper limit
- Refined grains – 200% over the recommended upper limit
- Sodium – 229% over the recommended upper limit
- Saturated fats – 158% over the recommended upper limit
- Solid fats – 281% over the recommended upper limit

Therefore, these are five items we no longer consume "in moderation," as their current level of consumption is far beyond the level

Figure 1. Dietary intakes in comparison to recommended intake levels or limits



we know to cause harm. Clearly, the term "moderation" is not understood. The only solution is a dramatic reduction in the amounts we consume of these items and re-education related to portions and hunger cues. Perhaps then we'll be able to consume these things in moderation.

However, there is also a flip side to the saying "everything in moderation." There are items we know to be very beneficial, items that we should be consuming in order to gain a potential benefit. These items include fruits, vegetables, whole grains and fiber. The latest data show that Americans are consuming (1-2) (See figure 1 for more on this):

- Fruits – 42% of the recommended minimum intake
- Vegetables – 59% of the recommended minimum intake

- Whole grains – 15% of the recommended minimum intake
- Fiber – 40% of the recommended minimum intake

These are also items we no longer consume in moderation as our current level of consumption is far below the level we know to be beneficial. The only solution is a dramatic increase in the amounts we consume of these items.

In addition, over two-thirds of Americans are currently overweight and over one-third are obese. We did not get this way by consuming "all things in moderation." We got this way by consuming many things, and many of the wrong things, in great excess. This is shown in figure 2.

Since 1970 the average American consumes 30% more calories with most of these calories coming from added sugars, solid fats, saturated fats and refined grains.

Even the motto from the American Dietetic Association, “all foods fit,” has been taken out of context. The original saying is not “all foods fit,” but, “all foods can fit within this pattern, if consumed in moderation with appropriate portion size and combined with regular physical activity.”

As we see, Americans are not consuming foods in moderation, nor are we engaged in regular physical activity. Over 70% of Americans are not meeting the minimum recommendations for activity/exercise. This is why the current concepts of “everything in moderation” and “all foods fit” for the average American are a myth.

Moderation is no longer an option in regard to the foods we know can be harmful, or in regard to the foods we know to be beneficial. In America, we are so far from what constitutes “healthy” that we have much work to do to get back to where we could once again discuss moderation. Rationalizing the over-consumption of harmful foods or the minimal consumption of beneficial foods with a saying that does not apply to our situation will not help us.

We should strive to double the intake of fruits, vegetables and fiber in order to reach the minimum recommendations. In addition, we need to cut our consumption of added sugars, fat, saturated fat and sodium by at least one-half just to get down to the upper level of the recommended limits.

Moderation will not help us accomplish this. We need a dramatic shift in our understanding of the current situation and the solutions we take.

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REFERENCES

1. What We Eat in America, National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (WWEIA, NHANES) 2001–2004 or 2005–2006.
2. ERS Food availability (per capita) data system: www.ers.usda.gov/data/foodconsumption/

Figure 2. Average daily per capita calories from the US food availability in 1970, 1990 and 2008, adjusted for spoilage and other waste

