A guide to smart serving and portion sizes

When it comes to kidney health, our food choices matter. A kidney-friendly eating plan can help slow the progression of chronic kidney disease (CKD), ease symptoms, and lower the risk of complications like heart disease, high potassium levels, and bone disorders.

Adapting to a kidney-friendly eating plan can feel overwhelming, especially if you are used to preparing and sharing traditional or cultural meals that are important to you and your family. The good news is you don't have to give up the foods you love. By adjusting portion sizes and making small changes, many familiar dishes can still fit into a kidney-friendly way of eating.

Portion sizes and kidney disease

Portion control is especially important when you're living with kidney disease. Eating the right portion sizes can help reduce the workload on your kidneys and slow down kidney damage. Managing portion sizes helps avoid overwhelming the kidneys — and being aware of your lab results (like potassium levels) can help you make smart choices that protect your kidney health.

What is serving size and portion size?

- **Serving size** is a standard, measured amount of food that is typically eaten. You can find this at the top of a nutrition label. The suggested serving size is the amount of food that the nutrition facts refer to.

Nutrition Facts

4 servings per container

Serving size **1 cup (227g)**

Amount per serving

Calories **280**

	% Daily Value*
Total Fat 9g	**12%**
Saturated Fat 4.5g	**23%**
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 35mg	**12%**
Sodium 850mg	**37%**
Total Carbohydrate 34g	**12%**
Dietary Fiber 4g	**14%**
Total Sugars 6g	
Includes 0g Added Sugars	**0%**
Protein 15g	
Vitamin D 0mcg	0%
Calcium 320mg	25%
Iron 1.6mg	8%
Potassium 510mg	10%

* The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.

- **Portion size** is the amount of food you choose to eat at one time, which can be greater or smaller than the serving size.

Here are some general guidelines for managing portion sizes of key nutrients:

Protein

Your protein needs depend on your body size and the stage of your CKD. Tracking your protein intake can be challenging and impractical for most people. But a more manageable approach is to choose foods that are less protein dense while still getting enough calories to feel satisfied. **Protein density** is how much protein a food provides per serving. Animal-based proteins like meat, poultry, and fish are the most protein-dense while eggs, dairy, and plant-based proteins like beans, grains, and nuts are less dense in protein.

In many cultures, meals are centered around animal proteins – like chicken, goat, lamb, beef or fish. You don't have to give up these meals. Instead, adjust the portion of protein and balance your plate with more vegetables, whole grains or carbohydrates.

25g protein
140 calories

7g protein
140 calories

For example, a 3 oz cooked chicken breast provides about 25 grams of protein, while ½ cup of cooked chickpeas provides only about 7 grams — yet both have around 140 calories.

To visualize the portions:

A **3 oz serving of animal protein** is about a deck of playing cards or the size of your palm.

A **½ cup of cooked beans** is roughly the size of the front of your clenched fist or a cupcake.

To find out exactly how much protein you need, talk to your doctor or dietitian

Sodium (salt)

People with CKD should aim to limit their salt intake to **1,500–2,300 milligrams per day**.

To manage your sodium intake, always check the nutrition label. Many pre-packaged, highly processed and frozen food items can have large amounts of added salt. A practical way to stay within your limit is to aim for no more than 600 milligrams of sodium per meal. This leaves a little room for snacks throughout the day.

2,300 milligrams of salt is equal to about one teaspoon of salt.

Tips to help manage your sodium:

1. Many traditional meals use salt heavy seasonings – like soy sauce, fish sauce, bouillon cubes, pickled vegetables, or salted meats. Instead of cutting these out completely, use smaller amounts, choosing no-salt or light salt versions or balancing with fresh herbs.
2. Choose recipes with sodium listed per serving — and stick to the serving size.
3. When dining out, limit salty foods like deli meats, dips and sauces. Ask for your sauce on the side so you can control how much you use. Choose low-sodium options like grilled meats, veggies, fruits and whole grains instead.

Potassium and phosphorus

Potassium and phosphorus are two important nutrients to monitor when you have kidney disease and how much you should eat can vary depending on your stage of CKD. Focus on understanding which foods are naturally higher or lower in these nutrients, and how portion size affects your intake.

Potassium

If you've been advised to follow a low potassium eating plan, become familiar with high potassium foods. Some traditional foods – like plantains, yams, beans, avocados, and tomatoes – can be high in potassium and should be eaten in moderation. Low potassium foods can become high potassium if eaten in large amounts. Here's a quick guide:

- **High** in potassium (foods with more than 250 mg of potassium per serving): bananas, plantains, avocados, potatoes, black beans, processed cheeses, beef and pork.
- **Medium** potassium (foods with 150-250 mg of potassium per serving): oranges, apples, corn, chicken breast, milk, almonds and peanuts.
- **Low** potassium (foods with less than 150 mg of potassium per serving): cooked broccoli, grapes, berries, cabbage (including kimchi), okra, eggs, tofu, white and wheat bread.

Portion size matters too. For example:

- ½ cup of applesauce has about 120 mg of potassium — double the portion, and it jumps to 240 mg.
- A whole medium avocado has around 700 mg of potassium, but just ¼ of one gives you only 175 mg—a more kidney-friendly amount.

Phosphorus

Managing phosphorus starts with knowing where it comes from. Phosphorus is found in both natural and added forms:

- **Natural phosphorus** is present in animal and plant proteins—but isn't listed on the Nutrition Facts label.
- **Added phosphorus** (in the form of phosphate additives) is used in many processed foods and can be found in the ingredients list.

Keep in mind:

- Your body absorbs more phosphorus from animal foods than from plant foods — swap some animal protein for plant-based protein like beans or tofu.
- Read ingredient lists for words with "phos-" (like tricalcium phosphate or phosphoric acid). These are added forms of phosphorus and are absorbed quickly by your body.

It can be challenging to cut back on portions of your go-to comfort foods. The key is to replace those foods with more kidney-friendly options, while incorporating healthy fats and fiber to help you feel satisfied.

A renal dietitian can help you create a kidney-friendly eating plan that not only supports your health goals but also aligns with your taste preferences, culture and lifestyle.

For more information on kidney-friendly eating and nutrition, visit kitchen.kidneyfund.org

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