

Healthy Holiday Eating

The holiday season is a time for parties and celebrations. If you get together with family and friends, chances are that you'll run into food in all of its glory. Whether your taste runs to old standbys or desires something new, it's easy for normal eating patterns to take a back seat at holiday social events. By following a few tips on holiday eating, you and your family can enjoy special foods while keeping a balanced and healthy diet.

Choosing Well

There are no "good" and "bad" foods, only good and bad eating habits. Let's start by taking a look at the Food Guide Pyramid. Grain products, vegetables, fruits, low-fat milk products, lean meats, fish, poultry, and dry beans all have a place in a healthy diet. The pyramid shows that we should choose fewer foods that are high in fat or sugar, while selecting more fruits and vegetables, which are packed with important vitamins and minerals.

What matters most is the total amount and types of food you eat over several days. Many people dread the unwanted pounds that often come from too many special holiday foods, which often are high in sugar and fat. Yet, the Food Guide Pyramid is about more than weight control. A diet that is balanced to reflect the pyramid provides a steady stream of energy, repairs and restores the body, and helps manage stress and avoid mood swings.

Taking Control

Before a holiday event, eat a snack or light meal. Foods high in protein, like chicken or cottage cheese, help you to eat less later. Fasting ahead of time to leave room for a big meal or extra trips to the buffet may lead you to overeat.

It's important not to let kids eat whatever they want during this festive time of year. In particular, limit the number of sodas your children drink. Soda has little or no nutritional value and is loaded with caffeine and sweeteners. These ingredients, which

are found in many holiday goodies, can make your child hyper. Besides, weight gain isn't just an adult issue. Too many children are obese, so don't let their holiday fun add excess weight.

If you are hosting a holiday event, do your guests a favor by including non-alcoholic beverages and healthier items such as vegetables, salad, and fruit on the menu. Use low-calorie and fat-free salad dressings. Putting these items out before the sweets, meats, and soufflés will give everyone a better chance of not overdoing it with high-fat, high-calorie choices. Look for healthy substitutes for ingredients when you whip up your favorite holiday fare. You may be able to use low-fat or skim milk products instead of whole milk products in some dishes. In some baked goods, you can swap applesauce for oil. Switching ingredients can create tasty results without the high calories that often come with rich foods.

Keeping Your Balance

People usually run into problems with weight gain during the holidays when they enjoy more high-sugar or high-fat foods. So what to do? Enjoy yourself! Eat tempting holiday foods, but use a bit of restraint and keep yourself from indulging too much. At the same time, be sure that you and your family members are getting enough of the nutritional foods your bodies need. Snacks and desserts are fine, but they're not meals. See that everyone keeps their nutritional balance with servings that include fruits and veggies.

Washing It Down

What you drink at the holidays can add to the problem. Alcoholic beverages are long on calories but come up short in nutrition and can lead to harm. Instead, serve hot cider, diet sodas, fruit punch, and flavored waters.

Playing It Smart

Here are a few more tips for healthy holiday eating:

- * Eat smaller portions of food. This is especially important at a buffet, where you may want to try everything. Choose the items you want to try the most, and eat a small portion of each.
- * Eat slowly. Many times, people eat so fast that their stomachs don't have enough time to register that they are full. Savor each bite and enjoy the taste of the

food-chances are you will eat less. Go for a walk with your family to see holiday displays in your neighborhood.

- * Offer to bring a low-calorie dish to holiday parties. Your host might appreciate it, and you'll know that at least one healthy item will be on hand.
- * Don't park yourself in front of the buffet at a party. Mingle! If you stand by the buffet, you'll eat more than you would if it was across the room.
- * Avoid fast food. The holiday season can keep you on the go with little time to prepare meals. Fast food may be handy but often is high in fat. Prepare and freeze quick healthy meals ahead of time to stay out of the fast food trap.
- * Be realistic. Don't try to diet during the holidays, just aim to maintain your present weight.

Food and holiday gatherings go hand in hand. So, join in and help yourself to some tasty treats, keeping the Food Guide Pyramid in mind. If you've been exercising, keep it up during the holiday season. If you aren't getting enough exercise, it's a great time to start. With a dash of discipline and a pinch of planning you'll have a great recipe for holiday fun without the regret that many of us feel the next time we step on a scale.

From the U.S. National Agricultural Library: Food and Nutrition Information Center

Reviewed 09/07