Feast Well

How to enjoy holiday meals and still stay healthy

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During the holidays, eating is a huge part of celebrating the season. But neither home-cooked feasts nor gourmet meals have to mean giving up on eating healthy food. You can certainly make healthier choices without sacrificing flavor or satisfaction, whether you're sharing a meal with loved ones at home or dining with friends at a fancy restaurant.

OK, so you're watching what you eat—whether the goal is to lose weight or to simply make healthy food choices, the holiday season is a minefield of tempting morsels that requires smart decision-making. From mouthwatering displays of holiday candy and desserts at grocery and department stores to office party spreads, food is everywhere and the urge to binge is hard to fight. "With this in mind, it becomes important to think of outings at restaurants and holiday parties as a break from the usual but not an excuse to splurge on anything we see," says Liz Weinandy, MPH, RD, an outpatient dietitian at Ohio State University's Wexner Medical Center.

Certainly that's difficult to do when buffets and plates piled high with delicious-looking food beckon and friends and associates indulge in merry munching. "We may feel like we shouldn't be eating that way, but it's easy to get caught up in the 'everyone else is doing it' attitude," Weinandy continues. "The fact is, almost 70 percent of all Americans are overweight or obese, and at holiday time, plates overflowing with food isn't uncommon; in fact, that is more the norm. But as a nation, we can't keep eating this way because our health will really continue to deteriorate."

To resist the temptation to overeat during the holidays, nutrition experts offer the following guidelines:

Eat regular meals. Getting ready for the holidays often leaves little time for meal preparation. This results in missed meals and can lead to overeating at the next meal. Regular meals provide energy throughout the day and ensure that you'll choose more balanced and nutritious foods.

Drink water 30 minutes before eating. "Always start your meals with a glass of water," advises Shane Allen, certified weight loss specialist, sports nutritionist and personal trainer for

PersonalTrainer.com. Allen's advice is sage because, according to recent findings published in the journal Obesity, having a couple glasses of water before your holiday meal could help you lose weight. "This makes sense because water fills up your stomach, helping you feeling more satiated," Allen adds. "The key in this experiment was that the test group drank water 30 minutes before each meal. Researchers think this time between drinking and eating helps you feel full while giving you time to shape better decisions about what you eat."

Don't shop while hungry. Whether you're stopping at the grocery store to buy necessities or browsing for party gifts, shopping on an empty stomach might lead you to fuel up on fast food and quick, high-calorie snacks.

Then there are major diet sabotagers lying in wait on those groaning, food-laden holiday tables. The following waist-expanders are foods the experts advise you skip.

Casseroles. According to Allen, "Calories don't create fat; starchy carbs and sugars do, and many of those starchy carbs live in casseroles. Even green bean casserole has fried onions on top. Broccoli-cheese casserole has rice. And stuffing? Keep that bread in the bird."

Sugary extras. "Sugars are in the same boat as starchy carbs when it comes to fat gain. But sugars pack on pounds much quicker, and with greater side effects," Allen says. "Spikes in your blood glucose levels can cause you to crave more carbs and then give you that 'crash' feeling later. Keep that gelatinous cranberry sauce in the can and push those pies away."

There is one—just one—sugar allowance, Allen says: "That's apples. They're high in fiber and low glycemic, which means the sugar in them is released into the bloodstream slowly, so your body goes through less of a sugar spike and energy swing when you eat them. For a great fat-busting, guilt-free apple dessert alternative to help lose weight over the holidays, coat four granny smith apples with 1 tablespoon of cinnamon, 1 teaspoon of nutmeg and 2 tablespoons of Splenda or stevia. Bake them in a shallow dish with 1/4-inch of water for 30 minutes at 350 degrees, or until the apples are soft. You can even melt a little butter over them before you dig in."

In addition, leave the fried foods, sodas and fruit juices alone.

But even if you make it past those holiday standards, it's not easy avoiding festive treats because those are often what we crave. Still, don't beat yourself up for taking pleasure in the festivities. "The holidays are meant to be enjoyed," says Kristen Trukova, MS, RD, a staff member at the Cancer Treatment Centers of America at Midwestern Regional Medical Center. "While overeating at one holiday party will not cause a 10-pound weight gain, overeating at several holiday parties might. Choose one or two events where you eat what you enjoy, and focus on moderation and limits at the others."

Trukova also suggests you plan ahead and involve a friend. "Decide what cocktail or beverage you enjoy most, and choose one," she advises. "Perhaps you can start with sparkling water or a fruit spritzer. You and your friend can keep each other on track to avoid overindulging."

Also, watch portion size. “If a person is a volume eater and likes very large portions, it’s important they fill up on mostly low-calorie foods such as vegetables,” Weinandy says. “If the person really likes quality cuisine or how foods taste, then small portions become key since these foods generally will be higher in calories.”

She suggests taking your plate and dividing it in half. “On one half put non-starchy vegetables, such as salad, cooked vegetables or some from the vegetable tray. On the remaining half, put protein and starch in equal, moderate amounts. This automatically helps to cut down on overall calories.”

Another great tip, say nutritionists, is to bring your own meals to the celebration to enjoy and share with others. This is entirely appropriate if you have, for example, severe food allergies.

If you’re hosting a holiday party or dinner, make sure you have several dishes that involve fruits and vegetables, advises Trukova. In addition, Weinandy says, “Include a lot of healthy foods—vegetable dishes that aren’t too high in fat, fresh fruit, and then a nice mixture of higher-calorie indulgences with more sensible entrees and sides.”

“Following a meal, plan to take a walk as a group,” Trukova adds, “or have a group sport or snowball fight to burn off a few extra calories.”

If you’re dining out, avoid appetizers because they often have a surprising amount of calories. Share a large entree, or just eat half and put aside the rest to take home. Another tactic is to eat slowly and savor your food. “Not only does that increase your enjoyment of the meal, but the more slowly you eat, the less total food you are likely to consume,” Trukova says.

One big no-no is going to a party when you’re famished. “Eat a small snack or meal two to three hours beforehand,” Weinandy advises. “If you are really hungry and facing a lot of temptations, this will spell disaster.”

But there’s also a less restrictive approach to holiday eating that can help to keep the health consequences of your indulging minimal. Splurge for a meal on the big day, “and then get back into the groove of healthy eating to balance out that large-calorie day,” Weinandy says.

What’s more, try not to deviate from other healthy routines during the holidays. Continue being active by going to the gym or walking each day. Get plenty of rest, too, because findings show people who don’t get enough sleep tend to overeat.

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