

10 Eating Tips for a Healthy Holiday Season

Food is an important part of many holidays, celebrations, family and cultural traditions. In fact, special occasions often center around food. As a result, many people gain a little (or a lot of) weight between Thanksgiving and the New Year. What's to blame? Perhaps it's all the tempting treats available during the holiday season or the pressure from family, friends, and co-workers to overeat. Maybe it's the increased emotional eating (whether it be from holiday stress or holiday joy) or the extreme laxity with eating and physical activity regimens in anticipation for the strict "new diet and exercise plan" you're going to start January 1st. Regardless of the reasons, it is not necessary to avoid holiday festivities in an attempt to maintain your weight. Consider these 10 tips for fully enjoying the holiday season without gaining weight!

1. Focus on weight maintenance vs. weight loss during the holidays. If you are currently overweight and want to lose weight, this is not the time to do it. Maintenance of your present weight is a big enough challenge during the holiday season. Don't set yourself up for failure by making unrealistic goals for yourself.

2. Plan on NOT dieting after the New Year. Anticipation of food restriction sets you up for binge-type eating over the holidays ("after all, if I'm never going let myself eat this again after Jan. 1st, I might as well eat as much as possible now!") Besides, restrictive diets don't work in the long run. They increase your loss of lean body mass vs. fat, slow down your metabolism, increase anxiety, depression, food preoccupation, and binge eating, and make weight re-gain more likely.

3. Be physically active every day. Often, students' busy holiday schedules (or lack of structured schedules) bump them off their exercise routines. Physical activity, especially aerobic activities (like brisk walking, jogging, bicycling, roller blading, and swimming) can help relieve stress, regulate appetite, and burn up extra calories from holiday eating.

4. Eat a light snack before going to holiday parties. It is not a good idea to arrive at a party famished. Not only are you more likely to overeat, but you are also less likely to resist the temptation of eating the higher fat and higher calorie foods. Try eating a piece of fruit, a small carton of yogurt, or a string cheese before you go.

5. Make a plan. Think about where you will be, who you will be with, what foods will be available, what foods are really special to you (that you really want to eat) vs. those that you could probably do without, what are your personal triggers to overeat and how can you minimize them. Once you've thought about all of these things, make a plan of action. It's much easier to deal with a difficult social eating situation if you've already planned for it.

6. Take steps to avoid recreational eating. While some foods are more calorie-dense than others, no food will make you gain weight unless you eat too much of it. At parties and holiday dinners, we tend to eat (or keep eating) beyond our body's physical hunger simply because food is there, and eating is a "social thing." To avoid recreational eating, consciously make one plate of the foods you really want. Eat it slowly--enjoying and savoring every tasty bite. Then, when you're done, pop a mint or stick of gum in your mouth, get a tall glass of water and sip on it throughout the night, or position yourself away from the buffet table or food trays to keep yourself from overeating.

7. Reduce the fat in holiday recipes. There are plenty of low fat and low calorie substitutes that are amazingly tasty. Try using applesauce in place of oil in your favorite holiday breads; use egg substitutes in place of whole eggs; try plain nonfat yogurt in place of sour cream. Magazines are full of reduced calorie and reduced fat holiday recipes. Give them a try, and share your cooking creations with friends and family.

8. Choose your beverages wisely. Alcohol is high in calories. Liquors, sweet wines and sweet mixed drinks contain 150-450 calories per glass. By contrast, water and diet sodas are calorie-free. If you choose to drink, select light wines and beers, and use non-caloric mixers such as water and diet soda. Limit your intake to 1 or 2 alcoholic drinks per occasion. And, watch out for calories in regular soda, fruit punch, egg nog, and gourmet coffee drinks as well.

9. Enjoy good friends and family. Although food can be a big part of the season, it doesn't have to be the focus. Holidays are a time to reunite with good friends and family, to share laughter and cheer, to celebrate and to give thanks. Focus more on these other holiday pleasures, in addition to the tastes of holiday foods. The important thing to remember is balance and moderation. It's OK to eat too much once in a while. Just relax, enjoy the holidays, and remember what the season is all about.

10. Maintain perspective: Overeating one day won't make or break your eating plan. And it certainly won't make you gain weight! It takes days and days of overeating to gain weight. If you over-indulge at a holiday meal, put it behind you. Return to your usual eating plan the next day without guilt or despair 😊

Happy Holidays!