

Visions of Sugarplums...

Visions of sugarplums. Chestnuts roasting. Turkeys basting. The beginning of the holiday season is upon us. How much does the average American gain from Thanksgiving to New Year's Day? Perhaps less than you'd expect. Research tells us that the average weight gain is actually about a pound or maybe two. Not so bad, right? However, research also tells us that many folks never lose that 1-2 pounds, despite the best intentions and New Year's resolutions. So that 1-2 pounds really adds up through the years. Also, those that are overweight are more likely to gain more during the holiday season. Read on for some practical advice to make it through the upcoming joyful season without unwanted weight gain.

1. Be realistic.

Whether you are overweight or not, it's not fair to expect yourself to lose weight during the holidays. Consider focusing on weight MAINTENANCE, rather than weight LOSS during the season. Consider yourself a success if you make it through the parties and festivities with a consistent exercise schedule and no extra weight come January 1.

Start out the season with a plan. Write down potential obstacles to healthy eating and brainstorm solutions before the holidays are underway. Did you overdo it at the office potluck last year? Volunteer to bring the veggie tray this year, or bring a lowfat entrée to share. Then plan on only "tasting" others' dishes. Will holiday travel prevent you from exercising? Invest in some lightweight rubber resistance bands to stuff in your suitcase. And don't forget that walking, running, and climbing stairs require little equipment and can be done almost anywhere. Address your personal obstacles ahead of time...make a plan...and stick to it.

2. Pick and choose.

Enjoying fine foods and/or childhood favorites are part of the pleasures of the holiday season. Don't deprive yourself! Instead, pick and choose among your favorites – splurge on ONLY the special foods that make your holidays meaningful. If your Aunt Nancy makes a pecan pie to die for, enjoy a small piece and skip the Stove Top stuffing that your bachelor brother whipped up from the box. Do the same with the store-bought dinner rolls and butter. If you LOVE peanut brittle, but find fudge just so-so, it doesn't make sense to indulge in both. Have some peanut brittle, but make sure to set limits. Don't "waste" calories on high fat/calorie foods that don't bring you pleasure.

Make sure you consciously enjoy each savory bite of your favorite holiday goodies. Make it a real "experience". There's less chance you'll feel deprived and guilty if you enjoy your favorites in moderate amounts.

Pay attention to your body's natural cues. When you start to feel full, STOP EATING!

3. Replace one holiday dish with a new, lower fat recipe.

Remove just one calorie/fat-laden traditional holiday dish. Replace it with a lighter version or a whole new lower fat, nutritious dish. There are plenty of websites to offer

suggestions (try www.foodfit.com or www.deliciousdecisions.org). Do this every year and think of it as a tradition.

4. Don't skip meals.

On the day of a holiday party, make sure to eat small, high fiber mini-meals that contain a mix of protein and healthy carbs throughout the day. "Saving up" your calories during the day may give you the false impression that it's okay to eat ½ a cheesecake or a few extra helpings of buttery mashed potatoes at your evening party.

5. Party right – focus on the frolic.

While attending holiday gatherings, situate yourself so that you are NOT facing the food table. Make sure to relax and focus your attention on time and conversations with family and friends rather than how many calories are in that cheese ball.

After surveying the whole food situation, decide ahead of time which foods are worth eating and which ones you can skip without feeling deprived (see number 2).

Use the smallest plate available and arrange your food attractively on it. Your portions will appear larger. If you always start with less than what you think you want to eat, you may be surprised at how little it takes to actually satisfy you.

Eat slowly (it takes 20 minutes for your stomach to tell your brain that its full). Drink a glass of water and wait at least 15 minutes before getting seconds. Sometimes a stick of sugar-free mint gum (or brushing your teeth) can help you avoid an additional trip to the food table.

Eat your calories – don't drink them. Stick to water, sparkling water, diet soda, light beer and wine spritzers instead of punches, eggnog, and mixed drinks that can have 500 calories a serving! Make sure to drink a full glass of water between alcoholic beverages.

To save calories, load up on high fiber veggies...and steer clear of dishes/dips with mayo, sour cream, and cream fillings as well as desserts with icing.

6. DIY:

Consider hosting your own get-together. Get creative with a lighter menu. Rather than focusing on food, plan a caroling party. Or gather for a walk to collect pinecones, ivy to make tree decorations or centerpieces. Return home to the scent of warm spiced tea and to enjoy some light snacks.

7. Keep it all in perspective.

Remember that 1 large piece of your grandmother's fudge is not enough to make you gain weight...and avoiding it at your family gathering won't cause you to lose weight. Consistent overeating without enough exercise OVER TIME will lead to unwanted weight gain. A long term commitment to healthy eating (that includes a little "wiggle room") is the only solution to maintaining a healthy weight for the long term.

The holidays are a time to celebrate. Eating in a convivial atmosphere with family and friends allows us to relax and cast away worries. It is more important to take part in holiday festivities (in moderation, of course) than to worry about every little calorie you consume. Happy holidays!