



Have a Happy, Healthy Holiday

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Every December we look forward to the festive season: visions of sugar plums dancing in our heads, we make shopping lists, party plans and string up the twinkly lights.

Then a slow but unmistakable shift occurs: by about December 15, still caught up in the whirlwind, we start to feel sluggish. By December 26, we vow never to touch another shortbread cookie or sausage roll again. Dutifully, we plan our New Year's diet and then wake up on January 1 and stuff ourselves at brunch...sound familiar?

According to one recent study, holiday weight gain stays with us through the year. If you gain 2-3 pounds each December it won't be long before you find yourself in larger jeans! Another option is to try and diet it all away each January. However, this feast/famine cycle is tiresome and terrible for our long term health.

What about a holly, jolly compromise? You can enjoy yourself through the holidays and still maintain your healthy weight. If you haven't found your own personal strategy for making it through the holidays without carrying any extra pounds, read on!

Revamp your holiday favorites:

It only takes 100 – 200 extra calories a day to lead to significant holiday weight gain. Remember that every little bit counts and tweak your usual holiday recipes to give them more of a light touch. For example, condensed milk can be swapped for a light version. Cream can be successfully replaced by evaporated skim milk - saving a ton of saturated fat. Use light mayo or light sour cream in dips and serve with crudités instead of bread or crackers. In cakes, half of the fat can be easily replaced by crushed pineapple or apple sauce. Use whole wheat pastry flour instead of all purpose in your cookie recipes for extra fibre. If you need more inspiration, websites such as www.eatingwell.com often have lighter versions of traditional holiday favorites.

Battle office politics:

If many of your office mates rue the holiday weight gain season, try creating a healthy office policy. You could bring treats only on Fridays (and ensure the leftovers get whisked away). Or you could resolve to bring only healthier versions of treats (see above!). If your office mates are less than cooperative, try and set a shining example yourself – it just might catch on. Bring apples with caramel sauce instead of cookies. Bring a salad, mulled cider or veggies and dip to potlucks. If all else fails, let your coworkers know that you are trying to avoid the holiday treats and not to offer them to you.

Indulge when it really counts:

In December, there are always going to be goodies lying around – but is most of it really worth it? Bypass the standard bagged and boxed fare and when something really special comes your way – have a piece and savour it! Besides, most boxed chocolates, cookies and chips are available year round...but your neighbour's candy cane cheesecake comes only once a year.

Tip the scales in your favour:

Eat well when you have control of your meals: focus on fruits and vegetables as your staples. If you know you have a special holiday party coming up where the food will be absolutely irresistible, plan ahead! For breakfast, have a hearty meal with protein and whole grain to keep you fueled during the day. For lunch, pack a salad full of vegetables and some lean protein. Right before the party have a snack with some staying power, such as 1/3 cup raw trail mix or a piece of sprouted grain toast with almond butter. When you get to the party, you can treat yourself with a clear conscience but you aren't so hungry that a few appies becomes a whole plate of them!

Beware holiday spirits:

Alcohol quickly erodes our healthy eating resolve. Remember that the recommended daily intake is no more than one drink a day for women and two drinks a day for men. Should you know you will have more, pace yourself. For each drink you have, have a glass of water in between. Soda with a slice of lemon looks like a mixed drink so you are less likely to get offered another round right away. The lightest drinks? 1.5 ounces of spirit neat or with a non-calorie mixer like soda water, a light beer or a 5 oz glass of wine.

Don't shop hungry:

Let's set the scene: You. At the mall after work. Scrambling to finish your shopping. You haven't eaten a thing since lunch and now the siren call of the food court beckons.

How to avoid this potential mishap? Always keep a stash of healthy snacks around. Individual yogurts and hummus are easy snacks to keep in the fridge at work. Those mini zipper bags are the perfect snack size for healthy trail mix, dried fruit, rice crackers or carrot sticks. Keep some in your drawer and have a snack in the late afternoon when you know you need to run errands after work. Pop a couple of high quality fruit and nut bars in the glove box for your drive or toss one in your purse. When hunger strikes...you will be ready.

If you must stop at the food court, choose wisely. Try a vegetarian wrap or a small smoothie. Have a fast food salad but beware those with fried chicken or full fat dressing. Half of a whole wheat bagel with lean turkey and light cream cheese will be less harmful to your healthy intentions than a burger.

Desiree Nielsen, RD(t), is the Choices Dietitian and a big fan of her sister-in-law's biscotti. Have a nutrition question for Desiree? Email her at nutrition@choicesmarket.com.