

Ask the Dietitian December 2021

Question: How do I manage my diet with all the treats around at Christmas and the holiday season. How do I keep my diet healthy and prevent weight gain.

Answer: This is a very timely question! Celebrations and family gatherings usually involve holiday cookies, fudge, chocolates and numerous other treats. Typical weight gain over the Christmas season can be at least 1-3lb.

Obviously at a meal or event, being able to enjoy celebration food should be okay. Holiday meals are about family, cultural tradition and experiencing something special, food is not just about nutrition!

However, having a holiday strategy can help prevent unnecessary weight gain. Do not allow yourself to get ‘super hungry’ so that you over-eat. Have a small snack before a gathering and avoid skipping meals. A snack could be an apple and peanut butter, or a yogurt. At the meal, wait until *all* the food is on the table before you serve yourself. Fill half your plate with vegetables, quarter of your plate with a protein food, and quarter of your plate with a carbohydrate source. Make good choices, do you need to have potato *and* a bread roll?

Broth based soups and salads can take the heat off appetite and fill you up. And of course include vegetables, raw or cooked. Brussel Sprouts or chocolate fudge?, tough choice I know! Although roasted sprouts drizzled with olive oil and seasoned, can be pretty darn delicious!

Stay well hydrated with water or other (non-alcoholic) zero calorie beverages. People can mistake hydration cues for ‘hunger’ cues. Plan meal times to reduce ‘grazing’ all day. If a meal time is coming up, *wait* until then and avoid consuming an extra 1,000 calories between meals, and that you are not even aware you ate!

Although more research is necessary, the data indicate that how we use and store calories can depend on the *chemistry* or make up of food. For example, calories from highly processed simple carbohydrates can make the body produce more of the hormone insulin which encourages the storage of those calories as fat! This leads to less available ‘fuel’ for other metabolic needs, and signals your body to increase hormones that produce hunger pangs, which in turn make you want to eat more!

Include ‘heart healthy’ fats in food choices, for increased satiety, anti-inflammatory properties and to take the place of the simple carbs. This might include nuts, seeds, oily fish and avocados.

Exercise or daily movement is important, especially after a large meal. A walk can help with digestion, burn off some of those extra calories *and* promote a good night's sleep. Poor sleep is linked to over eating and increased stress which tends to make us seek out simple carbohydrates. So exercise has the potential to deal with three issues at once!

Keeping a check on portion size can be crucial, remember the adage 'my eyes are bigger than my stomach'? Choosing smaller dinner plates is an old but good trick by simply reducing the available 'food real estate', unless you go for the 'Leaning Tower of Pisa' approach that is!

Enjoy all foods in moderation and make good choices with regards to the numerous holiday treats that abound.

Bottom line: Develop a holiday strategy and stick with it. Plan meals times and avoid grazing, fill up on vegetables and other low calorie items, include daily exercise and stay well hydrated. It's okay to have a special treat, choose wisely, eat slowly, savor and enjoy it, and the holiday season!

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