



Healthy Holiday Eating

Katlyn Leszczynski
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Try This Unique Approach to Stay Balanced During the Holiday Season

Do a quick Google search of ways to stay healthy during the holidays, and you'll get about 40,400,000 results. While many of these lists offer good advice, they focus on behaviors we should or shouldn't do, such as avoiding overeating or staying physically active, and feel more like commands than advice.

When it comes down to it, these lists can be hard to follow when life gets busy during the holidays and you start feeling stressed or find yourself face to face with a tempting treat.

This year, I'd like to offer another way to think about staying healthy during the holidays that tunes more into how you want to feel and less into what you think you "should" be doing. Ultimately, focusing on how you want to feel and choosing to do things that support that feeling is much more motivating and sustainable.

First, take some time to think about how you would like to feel during the holidays this year. It can be helpful to paint a mental picture and choose words that represent that picture. Don't overthink it – just start writing down words as they pop into your mind. Here's a list to give you a little inspiration, but choose words that are meaningful to you:

- Energized
- Connected
- Joyful
- Present
- Calm
- Thankful

Now go back through your list and pick the two or three that are most important. These words are the basis for how you make decisions during the upcoming months. When you decide to do (or not do) something, think about whether or not that action supports how you want to feel.

This process can also help you set up your non-negotiables, which are actions you need to make a priority in order to feel your best. Chances are, you already know what these actions are from experience, but they could be things like making sure you have time alone to relax, getting enough sleep at night or getting some type of physical activity every day. Many of these actions can be found on the healthy holiday lists, but now we're looking at them a little bit differently. Instead of things that we feel like we should do, they now become actions that support our health and happiness.

Here's an example to show you how to work through this process. Let's say I chose *energized*, *connected* and *present* as the words I want to describe how I go through the holidays. I know from experience that eating

healthy foods and getting physical activity help energize me and also manage my stress, so those are two of my non-negotiables. When I'm at my house, I make healthy meals and go for a walk every day. When I visit my parents for Thanksgiving, I feel connected with my family at the dinner table and enjoy recipes that have been passed down from my great-grandparents without any guilt. After eating, instead of all sitting down on the couch, I suggest we take the dogs for a walk. Making small decisions to support my health and well-being means I can enjoy the holidays and still feel good.

The holidays are a time that can be stressful for many. Instead of focusing on what you should or shouldn't do this year, my challenge for you is to focus on how you ideally want to feel and make decisions that will support you.

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Here's Why you Can't Stop Eating Halloween Candy

For many, Halloween is a wonderful time of year – an excuse to watch a scary movie, dress up, decorate and celebrate.

For many waistlines, however, it can be the beginning of the descent into holiday weight gain even in the days and weeks past the actual holiday.

So what causes the Halloween candy binge? And why can't you stop picking your way through the pile of trick-or-treating leftovers – or the pile of treats you bought on Nov. 1?

First, sugar actually activates many of the same reward centers of the brain as alcohol and drugs including cocaine. Studies have supported the theory that, in some circumstances, access to sugar can lead to behavior and neurochemical changes that resemble the effects of substance abuse.

To make it harder, many candies feature fat and salt, which can activate pathways in your brain associated with pleasure and reward, often compounded by nostalgic feelings for Halloweens (and candies) past.

Elizabeth Zawila, a nutritionist at the Advocate Good Samaritan Hospital Health and Wellness Center in Downers Grove, Ill., advises limiting the amount of access you have to candy in your home or office to make it easier to avoid the temptation and to be a mindful eater.

“If you start eating because you are hungry, there is a natural cue to stop once you are no longer hungry,” she says. “On the other hand, if you start eating for pleasure alone, there is no natural cue to stop. Eating these indulgent types of food remains pleasurable, usually until we are uncomfortably full and have totally missed the mark as far as when we should have quit indulging.”

When consuming pieces of Halloween candy – or French fries or ice cream – ask yourself if you really want or need more before you keep eating.

Zawila also advises that a healthy diet the rest of the year can help curb your sweet tooth before it devolves to a full-on binge.

“We tend to really like and crave the foods we eat most often,” she says. “If we are in the habit of preparing and eating healthy, whole foods, that is what we will ultimately want to eat most of the time, even if we deviate from time to time and indulge in sweets. In fact, indulging occasionally can help people overall stay on track with healthy eating.”

If you fall off the wagon, or are trampled by the proverbial wagon, it's never too late to make good decisions about your health, Zawila says.

“Because we are only human, there will likely be times when we over-indulge in these pleasurable foods,” she says. “The key is to not wallow in guilty feelings about it and get right back on track with healthy eating.”

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How to Eat Well at Your Holiday Party

Keeping excess pounds off can be hard enough, but the world turning cold and white can put a damper on exercise plans, and holiday party after holiday party can make it feel impossible.

Karli Burridge, an obesity medicine specialist at [Advocate Good Samaritan Hospital](#) in Downers Grove, Ill., says that while it's OK to indulge a bit during the holidays, there are steps to take to make sure you don't overdo it during your holiday bash.

"We currently live in a food environment that makes it difficult for the majority of people to stay at a healthy weight," she says. "Holiday treats make this even more difficult, so this season, prepare yourself with some helpful tools and tricks to stay on track."

Don't arrive hungry

Eat something healthy with protein and healthy fat before you head out the door. Having some food in you will help curb overeating during the meal itself. A handful of nuts, a cheese stick or a protein shake can help cut down an extra helping or two at the table.

Prioritize – what do you really want?

Survey the food options before you start to load your plate. Start with proteins and vegetables. After you fill up on those, if you decide you still really want some of the less healthy options or desserts, Burridge says you should allow yourself a small helping and savor it.

Also, before the meal, decide if you will have any alcohol or sugary beverages. If you choose to drink one or two alcoholic beverages, sip slowly and alternate water with your drink. While alcohol is calorie-dense, champagne, wine, low-carb beer and distilled liquors with no-sugar added mixers are your best choices. Avoid juices or sugary drinks and opt for a sparkling water garnished with some fruit instead.

Go slow

Make a conscious effort to eat slowly. Put your fork down between bites and chew your food thoroughly. Use the time to have a conversation with your friends and family. Have a conversation with a friend or family member between bites.

Then, Burridge suggests checking in with yourself after 15 minutes of slow eating.

"Ask yourself, 'How am I feeling?'" she says. "Stop eating when you feel satisfied, not stuffed, and wait 20 minutes before grabbing seconds so your body has time to tell your brain how full you actually are."

Set yourself up for success

Generally, holiday meals aren't exactly known for their nutritional balance. Try and take the initiative by volunteering to bring a healthy appetizer or veggie side dish to the gathering, and don't fill your pantry at home with holiday candies and cookies.

"Controlling your environment plays a big role in the food choices we make, so make your home a 'safe place' with minimal temptations to get you off-track," Burrridge says. "At parties, sit or stand away from the food area to avoid unconscious grazing."

Plan some physical activity

The day of your holiday party, start with some exercise.

"The best time for physical activity is the time when you are most likely to do it," Burrridge says. "This varies based on your schedule and lifestyle, but if possible, the morning can be a good time because you're less likely to have things come up to thwart your plan for activity that day."

Then, throughout the day, incorporate activity into the plans, whether it is a family walk, football game or whatever gets you and your loved ones up and moving.

Get back to normalcy

Having a day (or three) of indulgence is not the end of the world. Even if you have an epic cheat day during the holidays, you don't need to beat yourself up about it. Simply make sure you return to your healthy eating behaviors the next day.

"Living a healthy lifestyle is about consistency. If you consistently eat a nutritious diet, are consistently active and regularly get enough sleep, then a few days of being off-track won't have a huge effect on your health or your weight," she says. "Just be sure to get back to your usual healthy behaviors as soon as possible so you don't slide into a consistently less healthy lifestyle."

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Are Holiday Treats Putting Your Health at Risk?

Tis the season for candies, cakes and cookies with frostings, glazes and sprinkles. Not to mention hot cocoa, sugary sodas and festive adult beverages.

So, what could be wrong about a one-month binge on all the sweet treats the winter holidays offer – especially if you maintain a healthy weight and eat plenty of fruits and vegetables throughout the year?

A 15-year Harvard University study of American adults says if you're like most Americans, overloading on sugar could prove more harmful to your heart health than you think.

According to the study, people who eat large amounts of sugar have a higher risk of dying from heart disease, regardless of their sex, age, weight and exercise habits. In fact, adults who get 25 percent of their daily caloric intake from sugar are over two times more likely to die from heart disease, compared to those who get 10 percent of their daily calories from sugar.

“You could be leading a heart-healthy lifestyle, for the most part, and still put yourself at high risk for heart disease by eating too much sugar,” says Dr. Imran Ali, a cardiologist at Advocate Trinity Hospital in Chicago. On average, Americans consume nearly 30 teaspoons of sugar and sweeteners every day, which amounts to 100 pounds of sugar a year. High levels of sugar are often hidden in processed foods, breads, soda and fruit drinks.

Researchers are still exploring how excess sugar might harm the heart. However, science has concluded that drinking sugar-sweetened beverages can raise blood pressure. Also, a high-sugar diet is known to stimulate the liver to release more harmful fats into the bloodstream, which can lead to heart disease.

“While you should be able to enjoy the holidays, it's always a good idea to keep track of the amount of sugar you eat, and adjust your normal eating habits to accommodate sweets from time to time,” Dr. Ali says, adding “Keep in mind that a 12-ounce can of regular soda contains about nine teaspoons of sugar.”

Dr. Ali recommends adults to limit daily sugar intake. Women should have fewer than 100 calories, or six teaspoons, of added sugar a day. Men should have fewer than 150 calories, or nine teaspoons, a day, he says.

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