

## HOW TO HAVE A HEALTHY HOLIDAY

*Contributed by Heidi Roth, RDN, CHHC*

The holiday season is a time filled with celebration, family gatherings, and of course, delicious food. However, the abundance of rich meals, sugary treats, and festive cocktails can make it challenging to maintain a healthy diet! On top of that, we may find ourselves overeating for a variety of reasons. Does any of this sound familiar to you?

- **The nostalgia factor:** "This dish reminds me of my childhood" or "This tastes just like Mom's."
- **The holiday scarcity mindset:** "I can only eat this during the holidays!"
- **The classic excuse:** "I'll start eating better after the holidays."

With all these extra treats, can you guess what the average weight gain is during this season? You might be surprised to know that multiple studies show it's only about 1-2 pounds! While that might sound like good news, the reality is that most people don't lose this weight. Over time, these small yearly gains start to add up.

So, while no one is suggesting dieting during this festive time, striking a balance between indulging in holiday traditions and sticking to your health goals is crucial, and it's completely doable with a few mindful strategies. Here are some tips for enjoying the season without sacrificing your well-being:

### 1. Lighten Up Your Holiday Cooking

There are two mindsets regarding this. Many people wouldn't dream of altering treasured family recipes, which is understandable if it's for a special occasion. However, there are also many ways to make recipes healthier without sacrificing taste. Some suggestions include:

- Reduce sugar in baked goods. You can generally cut back the sugar in most baked goods up to 25% without sacrificing taste or texture.
- Swap out some of the white flour for more nutrient-dense options like almond flour.
- Cut down on added fats. Many older recipes call for multiple high-fat ingredients such as butter, cream, sour cream, and cheese - all in one recipe! (Growing up in the Midwest we called these "cheesy funeral potatoes," and brought them to every holiday gathering.) In addition to just cutting down on the fat, you can substitute plain Greek yogurt for sour cream, or cottage cheese for some extra protein as well.

### 2. Plan ahead for success. Before going to the festivities:

- Start the day with a healthy breakfast, rather than "saving all your calories." This will help prevent overeating at the event.
- Don't show up to the party starving! (Unless you want to find yourself parked in front of the queso dip for the evening.) Have a high-protein, high-fiber snack right before going to the event. Maybe some nuts, veggies with hummus, or cheese sticks and apple slices.
- Practice saying "No, thank you!" This might sound silly, but it works.
- Ask if you can bring something. Most hosts are happy to have some extra help, and you can bring something healthy that's tasty to you so at least there is one thing there you can eat.

### 3. During Parties and Events:

- Pay attention! What are you eating? Are you truly enjoying what you're eating? Slow down and ask yourself "Do I really like this?" If not, put it down and move on.
- Choose wisely. Would there be a better alternative? For example, instead of greasy deep-fried appetizers, a better option would be stuffed mushrooms, shrimp cocktail, or crudité and dip. Look for options that contain some vegetables and/or protein.
- Realize that the more variety there is, the more we tend to overeat. Before digging into a buffet, take a look around and make a deliberate choice about what looks good. What are some of the healthier options? What is worth the "splurge" of calories?





- Enjoy your food and eat mindfully. Savor each bite!
- Opt for a smaller plate, and don't put food on the rim of the plate.
- Ask yourself, do you really need to have a full serving of everything offered? Do you really need a second portion? Sometimes, the answer is a wholehearted YES! And that's perfectly fine – just make sure you are being mindful and not eating on autopilot. If the answer is NO, don't feel pressure to indulge.
- Pay attention to alcohol, which tends to not only be high in calories, but also lowers our inhibitions, making it easier to overeat. So, while it's fine to enjoy a festive cocktail, try to savor your drink, and alternate with water or a hydrating non-alcoholic drink. Mocktails are becoming more popular and make a good choice as well. Pay attention to the feeling of overindulgence and how you might feel the next morning.

#### 4. Day After Damage Control

- Soooo.... you REALLY enjoyed yourself the day before at the party. All is not lost! Remember it's more important what you do 90% of the time vs 10% of the time.
- Keep leftovers out of sight. If you have a lot left over, consider sharing some with a neighbor who might enjoy it as well.
- Get right back on track with your healthy habits - the longer you wait, the harder it is to restart healthy habits.

#### 5. Strategies for the Season

- Continue your healthy eating habits. Try to get in those extra servings of fruits and vegetables, watch your sugar intake, and try to get most of your calories from whole, unprocessed foods. Think of it as nourishing yourself instead of restricting yourself.
- Aim to move your body most days.
- The holiday season can intensify stress – make sure you get enough sleep and prioritize self-care.
- Enjoy this special time that only comes once per year!

The holiday season is a time to embrace joy, traditions, and special moments with loved ones — all of which is possible to enjoy while also taking care of your health. By adopting a few mindful strategies, you can savor the festive foods you love without overindulging or feeling deprived. The key is to find a balance—lighten up dishes where possible, plan ahead to avoid overeating, and stay present during gatherings. If you do end up indulging more than intended, don't stress; just get back to your healthy habits the next day. Remember, the goal isn't perfection, but rather enjoying the season in a way that feels good for both your body and spirit. So go ahead, savor the season, and give yourself the gift of mindful celebration!

***How will you savor this holiday season? What strategies will you use to stick to your health goals?***



*Heidi Roth, RD, LDN is a Registered/Licensed Dietitian, Health Coach and nutrition expert with a passion for health and wellness. She graduated from the University of Pittsburgh with a BS in Nutrition and Dietetics.*

