

HEALTHY HOLIDAY EATING TIPS

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It's that time of year again—the “holidays”—that span of time that encompasses Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's which is the foundation for many a neglected post-holiday resolution.

During these six weeks, emotions are elevated, hopes are high, stress is strong, and the annually recurring tempest of the temptation of tasty treats and caloric cravings adds yet another dimension (well, at least for some of us) to the joys and festivities of the season: the dreaded holiday weight gain!

Avoided by some about as much as the plague, while invited by others like Santa at a discount deer sale, holiday weight gain has become as much a preoccupation during the season as the more traditional elements of cooking, cleaning, and celebrating.

Good food—and lots of it—is both expected and encouraged during these special times, but excessive indulgence can bring on its share of payments to the piper called the human body, that wonderful biological machine which possesses a nasty little ability to detect when too many caloric deposits have been made and not enough withdrawals.

In order to help you navigate the extremes between self-indulgence and self-denial—neither of which is recommended—the Men's Health Network suggests the following 10 healthy holiday eating tips to keep you satisfied, healthy, and trim.

BEFORE YOU GO...

1. Aim for weight *maintenance* rather than weight *loss* – Accept the fact that the holiday season is *not* the best time to focus on *weight loss*—that is, unless you're absolutely certain that preparing for next September's triathlon, *right now*, will really give you that winning edge. Instead, focus on holding steady and minimizing *weight gain*. Go ahead and give yourself permission to indulge a bit. One day here and there “off the diet” or eating plan

isn't going to make you overweight, but don't go overboard. Then when January arrives, you'll at least be able to avoid the shame of not living up to that resolution that you knew you weren't going to keep anyway.

2. Eat before you go – Before heading out the door to the meal or party, eat a small meal or have a light snack. Having some food already in your stomach keeps your metabolism revved up and gives you a slight feeling of satiety (satisfaction), which will help guard against overeating later. Starving yourself, “saving up” your calories for the “big meal,” and going to the event on an empty stomach are likely to increase feelings of deprivation and anxiety, as well as promote stress eating, all of which are a sure-fire recipe for over-indulgence.

3. Plan ahead – Now c'mon, 'fess up, you've been to these things before; you know what to expect, so claiming ignorance won't cut it. Therefore, have a plan—no, not for winning the “Who Can Eat The Most Without Passing Out” contest for the third consecutive year—but for self-control, especially when it comes to your most tempting treats (e.g. chocolate). Think ahead about the things—sights, aromas, feelings, cravings, emotions, socializing, even that prodding from your well-meaning grandmother who still thinks you look too skinny—that trigger your personal patterns of overeating, binging, or “pigging out,” and then make plans to avoid or combat these things beforehand so they don't become overwhelming.

4. Keep exercising – Maintaining—or even slightly increasing—a regular schedule of physical activity will help decrease your appetite, keep your metabolism stoked, and give you a little caloric leeway to allow you to dig in to that sweet treat that's just got your name written all over it. Emphasize aerobic activities, e.g., walking, running, cycling, elliptical training, jumping rope, rollerblading, swimming, etc., and aim for at least 30 minutes on as many days as you can. Still, remember that your mouth can always outperform your legs. In other words, *storing* fat through eating

is always much easier to do than *burning* it off through exercise. So, unless you're putting in daily marathoner's workouts, don't expect your exercise routine to make up for several days of gut-bustin' extravaganzas. If you're going to work hard at exercising, don't negate the benefits by stuffing yourself meal after meal.

ONCE YOU'RE THERE...

5. Drink lots of water – Sipping on a glass of cold water or ice throughout the event is a good way to keep you feeling full (and therefore curb the inclination to overeat) and stave off dehydration from consuming too many high-sugar, high-salt goodies. An additional reason to avoid dehydration is that it can actually mimic hunger, tempting you to *eat* more when you should really be *drinking* more, especially water.

6. Practice portion control – It's not necessary to repeat out loud to yourself, "I *will* exercise self-control. I *will* exercise self-control. I *will* ..." Still, you've heard it before: moderation is the key. Sure, it's nice to dig into some palatable pleasantries that you might not routinely have, but is it worth the extra time and effort required later to work off that mile-high mound of food? (*Remember, you don't really have a gun to your head forcing you to finish all of it.*) It's highly unlikely that anyone is going to starve after they leave, and besides, no matter how full you get, hunger has a strange way of returning, so eating until you're totally miserable doesn't exactly testify to the superiority of the human intellect. So, eat up and sample what you want, just keep your portions reasonable, chew your food slowly, enjoy it, and keep your return trips to a minimum.

7. Eat slowly – Besides being a huge turnoff in public, inhaling your food undermines the body's messaging system that signals fullness and satiety. Eating and chewing food slowly gives the stomach time—usually about 20 minutes—to tell the brain that it's feeling full. On the other hand, when food is gulped down, by the time the stomach sends its fullness signal to the brain, it's too late: you've probably already consumed not only too much

volume, but too many calories as well. And if you're like most people, who want to not only enjoy the food, but also prolong the meal itself, then the situation is compounded as more and more "fast food" is heaped into an already overloaded stomach and metabolism. Slow down—the food's not going anywhere! (And besides, if you have to chase it, it probably wasn't cooked well enough anyway, and you were better off not having it.)

8. Eat food because you're hungry, not because it's there – Make a deliberate decision to control so-called recreational eating. Most people throw real hunger out the window when they attend holiday gatherings. As a result, they end up eating with their eyes rather than their appetites. Try this: after you arrive, take some time to examine what's available, and then decide what you *really* want. Fill up your plate, eat slowly, and then consciously determine to put the brakes on for a while so that your stomach can send its signal to your brain. Filling up a large dinner plate will provide you with more than enough volume, calories, and nutrients. And don't continue hovering over the dessert table once you've had your fill. Move away.

9. Veg out on veggies – If you absolutely must self-induce that oft-desired state of deep gastronomical delight, then do it with low-calorie, high-fiber vegetables. Filling up on healthy vegetables instead of high-fat, high-sugar, high-salt, and high-caffeine treats will make you feel full and provide an abundance of needed nutrients, but without the drawbacks of dehydration, nervousness, weight gain, and further overeating.

10. Enjoy yourself – Hey, they don't call it "the most wonderful time of the year" for nothing! Sure, the food's inviting, but it's not the only reason to enjoy the festivities. Allow yourself to enjoy other people (family, friends, coworkers, even new faces), the meaning of the season, personal reflections, renewed spiritual dedication, holiday games, and the fun and memories that you're being blessed to have. Food will always be available, but loving relationships are both fragile and temporary.

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