

Health tip: Leaner Ways for the Holidays

The holidays may be a challenging time to stay healthy – both physically and mentally. With holiday parties full of decadent food and drinks and busy schedules that may not allow time for our normal routines, we may find it difficult to make healthier decisions. We may find ourselves overindulging, which may lead to holiday weight gain. The holidays may also be a stressful time for many. Overbooked schedules, spending time with difficult family members, dealing with loss, and overspending on holiday gifts may all lead to increased stress. With a little forethought and planning ahead, however, it is possible to embrace and enjoy the holiday season.

Survival tips to avoid holiday weight gain:

1. Plan ahead. Before attending a holiday event, visualize what you will eat and the healthier choices you will make before you arrive.
2. Don't go to an event hungry. Before an occasion involving food, eat a piece of fruit, a yogurt, or other light snack before you go. This may help to curb hunger so you don't overeat when you're there.
3. Bring your own! Offer to bring an appetizer such as fresh veggies and low-fat dip. Or, ask to bring a healthier dish to serve at the main meal.
4. Buddy up. Make a goal with a friend to maintain your weight during the holiday season. That way you are accountable to someone other than yourself.
5. Limit leftovers. Send your guests home with the high-calorie leftovers if you have entertained. There are enough temptations outside the house. There is no need to make your home a difficult place to maintain control.
6. Make smart substitutions. Make holiday favorite dishes healthier. Cut the sugar, use trans-fat-free margarine instead of lard or butter, use one percent or skim milk instead of whole milk or cream. Small substitutions can maintain flavor while reducing calories and fat.



Consider a budget friendly holiday.

Have a plan when it comes to holiday spending so you don't overextend yourself. The plan may include creating a budget or could be to find a way to make more money – pick up extra hours at work, get an extra seasonal job, or clean out your basement or garage and sell unwanted items. Whatever you choose, having a plan helps us feel that we have some control over our lives, and that we're empowered.

Some considerations for gift giving:

- Pare down the gift lists to just a few meaningful items.
- Host a gift swap or Secret Santa, instead of buying each and every friend and family member a gift.
- Come up with “outside the box” gift ideas that show your love by offering time and energy such as baking or artwork.

7. Choose beverages wisely. Limit alcohol, which is high in calories. Liquors, sweet wines and mixed drinks contain 150 to 450 calories per glass. Choose instead water or seltzer, infuse water with seasonal fruit, lemon, or cinnamon or try a hot or green tea with honey.
8. Maintain perspective. A single day of overeating won't make or break your eating plan. It takes days of overeating to gain weight. If you overindulge at a holiday meal, put it behind you. Return to your usual eating plan the next day, and leave your guilt behind.
9. Celebrate the true meaning of the holiday. Try to give food less importance by focusing on what the holidays are really about, spending time with loved ones. To increase the quality time without focusing on food for hours, bring a family game.
10. Exercise! Sign up for a 5K, a fitness walk, a work challenge, or other fitness event. This may motivate you to focus on exercise and keep your body moving – a great way to prevent holiday weight gain. Check with your doctor before increasing your activity level.

Tips for coping with holiday stress.

In addition to holiday eating, stress can be a reason some of us overindulge. While the holiday season may be a time of joy, it may also be hectic and stressful. To cope with this stress, prepare yourself in the following ways:

1. Create a game plan. Spend a little time up front getting organized. Make a list of what you need to buy. Try to shop ahead of time and if you will be cooking, plan your menu.
2. Accept reality. Guests may arrive late. Your mother may get on your nerves. The turkey may be dry. Real life isn't a holiday special. Don't expect perfect decorations, a perfect meal, or perfect people. Try to go with the flow and enjoy what you have.
3. Beware of unhealthy stress relievers. Holiday stress causes some people to fall into bad habits such as smoking, drinking, or eating too much. Think about any unhealthy habits you have had during past holidays and plan for better ways to handle stress.
4. Create new traditions. Stressed out by the usual festivities? Try something different. Instead of cooking a huge meal on your own, make it a potluck. Ask adults to bring gag gifts or have a "white elephant" or used book gift exchange. Attend a local holiday concert, walk the neighborhood to look at holiday lights, or go sledding.
5. Make time for your health. In the holiday rush, don't let your well-being fall by the wayside. Try to stay on your normal sleep schedule and get regular exercise. If you can't find a 30-minute chunk of time for exercise, break it up into three 10-minute sessions spread through the day.
6. Watch out for caffeine and alcohol. Caffeine may raise stress levels and interfere with sleep. Alcoholic drinks contain lots of calories and drinking too much may make you feel depressed.
7. Give yourself a break. In the midst of doing things for others, it's easy to forget to take care of ourselves. If you feel stress building up, get away for a few minutes. Find a quiet corner and do some deep breathing. Listen to calming music, or just sit.
8. Enjoy! The holidays are supposed to be a time of joy and togetherness. In the flurry of the holidays, we sometimes forget what we're celebrating. Remember to savor the time with people you love.

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