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## Control Holiday Weight Gain

The two-month long “sweet season” begins with leftover Halloween candy and winds down with pumpkin and pecan pie, eggnog, fruitcake and candy. Bite by bite the ounces add up to pounds, unless you find a way to control holiday eating.

Research suggests that the average American gains about one pound during the winter holiday season. This is much less than the five to eight pounds commonly believed.

Unfortunately, researchers at the National Institutes of Health report that most people never lose that extra pound of weight, so it accumulates year after year. Later in life the extra weight may be a major contributor to obesity and the diseases associated with it.

It is unrealistic to try to lose weight during the stressful holiday season, so focus on maintaining your weight. You’re bound to indulge in many of your favorite foods that are only available during the holidays. It’s hard to stick to a healthy eating plan when there are so many delectable treats at every party and get-together.

Plan ahead so you can enjoy your favorite foods without letting your nutrition goals go out the window. To avoid packing on extra weight, balance what you eat with regular physical activity. You will gain weight if you eat more calories than you burn.

### Stress & Food Cravings

Do you relieve holiday stress by eating some favorite homemade goodies? When your body is stressed, there are actually chemical reactions taking place that cause you to want to eat. It is thought that both sugar and fat release endorphins in

the brain, giving a temporary feeling of joy and peacefulness and making you want more of them!

Eating a big piece of Aunt Sue’s peanut butter fudge, which is loaded with carbohydrates or sugar, affects blood sugar levels and makes you crave more carbohydrate-rich foods. Some people crave salty foods (e.g. potato chips, pretzels and dill pickles), relieving stress by crunching and grinding them with their teeth.

Caffeine is another item reached for in times of stress. It provides a jolt of energy, but too much of it may keep you from getting good rest. Without proper rest, it’s hard to accomplish all you need and the stress cycle continues.

Healthy eating is the best way to withstand stress and curb unwanted cravings. Eat a well-rounded diet containing a variety of whole grain foods, fruits, vegetables, low-fat milk and lean meats. Keep your energy level up by eating small, frequent meals. This also makes it easier for you to maintain a healthy weight. To avoid grabbing fast food or something tempting from the food court, pack some healthy snacks when shopping or running errands.

Physical activity helps boost your energy level so you can be more productive during the holidays. It also helps your body relax, releases emotional tension, promotes better quality sleep, and creates feelings of psychological well-being. Do some type of aerobic exercise every day, preferably in the morning, because it “jump starts” your metabolism and keeps it elevated for up to 24 hours. You can burn about 225 calories in one hour of walking at a moderate pace. Take a family walk and burn calories while you’re having fun.

In addition to healthy eating and getting enough physical activity, reduce your holiday stress by: getting organized; scheduling your time; drinking plenty of water and getting adequate sleep.

### **Sensible Eating at Parties & Buffets**

Food is everywhere during the holidays. The keys to controlling calorie intake are moderation and portion control.

Follow these helpful tips for eating sensibly at holiday buffets and parties without depriving yourself or feeling guilty.

- Maintain a regular eating schedule, starting with breakfast. Don't skip meals, because this lowers blood sugar levels and causes you to overeat the rest of the day to make up for missed calories.
- Balance party meals with other meals during the day. Eat small, healthy meals with fewer calories so that party food won't cause you to exceed your calorie needs for the day.
- Never go to a party hungry. Take the edge off your hunger by eating a healthy, filling snack (e.g. fruit, pretzels, crackers or low-fat yogurt) beforehand so you won't overeat.
- Drink plenty of water throughout the day, including a glass before the party. It helps fill you up and offsets dehydrating drinks (e.g. coffee and alcohol).
- See what foods are available, pre-think your choices, and allot your calories wisely. Fill up on healthy foods first. Eat plenty of plain fruits and vegetables, lean meats and low-fat milk products. Limit intake of high-calorie, high-fat foods.
- Take your own low-calorie foods to the party to replace high-fat items like cheese and crackers. Excellent choices are veggies with a low-calorie dip or a fruit salad.
- Use a small plate so that it looks full and you won't feel cheated.
- Take smaller portions, and eat only the foods you really like. You can eat whatever you'd like, as long as it's in moderation.
- Fill half the plate with simple vegetables and a quarter with carbohydrates. The remaining quarter should be protein foods, which help you to feel full longer and help curb the carbohydrate cravings.

- Eat small bites, chew slowly, and savor each delicious bite. You will probably enjoy the food more, get full faster and won't overeat.
- Don't drink your calories. Consume alcohol in moderation, if at all. This tip involves safety and common sense as much as nutrition. Besides, alcohol can increase your appetite, yet it reduces the number of fat calories you burn for energy. Research also shows that alcohol lowers testosterone levels for up to 24 hours after drinking.
- Don't hang out by the buffet table. Serve your plate and move away so you won't be tempted to graze.
- Before going back for seconds, wait 20 minutes for your food to "settle." It takes that long for your stomach to tell your brain that you're full. You'll probably find you're no longer hungry!
- Don't make food the priority at parties and get-togethers. Focus on making memories and socializing with friends and family away from the buffet table. Savor the special time you're spending with loved ones.
- If you overindulge one day, make up for it by being more calorie-conscious the next few days.

**Desserts:** Consider these options before grabbing the first dessert on the table.

- Save calories by skipping dessert or choosing fresh fruit when it is available.
- If you want dessert, eat fewer calories during the meal.
- Take only a half portion, or select a sampling of bite size pieces of several desserts.
- Eat only your absolute favorite one or two items, or choose special desserts that are not available at other times of the year.
- Limit intake of high-fat, high sugar desserts. When choosing one of the fattier, more satisfying desserts, eat only a small portion. Good choices include: puddings; rich ice creams/ chocolate mousse; flourless chocolate cakes; cheesecake and fresh fruit with whipped cream. Pie is another good option, particularly pumpkin, as long as you don't eat the crust.
- If you go low-fat, skip most of the fattier desserts and head for angel food cake. It has

no fat, very little sugar and only about 800 calories for an entire cake. Fruitcake, sponge cake and macaroons are other good options.

- Take a sip of a low-calorie beverage between bites. This lets you enjoy the food longer and helps you feel full. Remember that beverages with alcohol or cream (e.g. specialty coffees and holiday drinks) are packed with fat, sugar and calories.

Get plenty of exercise! You gain weight if you eat more calories than you burn through physical activity.

### **Cutting the Calories in Foods & Drinks**

The average Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner is notorious for large portions and contains as much as 2,000 calories. This is the entire daily allotment of calories for most men and women, according to [www.MyPyramid.gov](http://www.MyPyramid.gov).

Here are a few ways to reduce the calories that you consume from popular holiday foods and beverages.

**Foods:** Eat plain, nutritious fruits and vegetables, like sweet potatoes, pumpkin, cranberries and green beans.

**Sweet Potatoes:** Make sure you eat the outside as well as the inside of the sweet potato, because fiber is located in the skin.

**Pumpkin:** Try mixing pumpkin into some of your favorite bran muffins, soups, or even pumpkin-based pastas. Pumpkin pie has added fat and sugar, but if you must have it, at least skip the crust.

**Cranberries:** If you're not a big fan of cranberries on your turkey, eat dried cranberries for a healthy snack.

**Green Beans:** Enjoy fresh, steamed green beans rather than the traditional high-calorie green bean casserole containing mushroom soup, cheese and butter. Or, make a lighter version using almonds, crunchy French onions and light butter instead of the soup, cheese and regular butter.

**Complex Carbohydrates:** Choose complex carbohydrates that help you maintain a steady metabolism without the highs and lows of blood-

sugar swings. Examples include: whole grains; whole-wheat pasta; legumes; oatmeal; sweet potatoes and nut butters.

**Turkey:** Turkey is packed with protein and offers the least amount of fat of holiday meats, if you remove the skin and don't drown it in gravy. White meat has less fat and calories than dark meat. A 3-ounce portion of meat is about the size of the palm of your hand or a deck of cards.

**Beverages:** Remember that your drink choices also add calories that can contribute to holiday weight gain. To help keep your holiday healthy, choose fat-free milk drinks and limit sugar sweetened beverages and alcohol.

**Eggnog:** This is a holiday favorite, but an 8-ounce serving of non-alcoholic eggnog made with whole milk has 342 calories and 19 grams of fat. Add alcohol and the calories increase to nearly 450! Choose or make a low-calorie version using low-fat milk. If you make your own eggnog, leave out the raw eggs, which may contain salmonella bacteria and make you sick.

**Coffee Drinks:** A mocha-flavored coffee drink can add 400-500 calories to your daily intake. That's as many calories as some people consume at one meal! If your coffee drink is one of those 500-calorie drinks made from whole milk, then you will gain a pound in seven days. An extra 3,500 calories add up to a one-pound weight gain.

When you need a refreshing coffee drink while shopping, consider asking for fat-free milk and no whipped cream. This shaves off about 200 calories and makes it a more reasonable choice.

**Carbonated Beverages & Fruit Drinks:** These two beverages provide the most calories in the American diet, according to Science News. Adults get 14% of calories from sodas and fruit drinks containing less than 10% juice. One 20-ounce bottle of soda contains 250 calories, 16 teaspoons of sugar, and no nutrient value. Drinking one 20-ounce sugar sweetened soda per day packs on an extra pound of body weight in 14 days.

**Alcoholic Drinks:** Consume alcohol sensibly and in moderation, if at all. According to the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, moderate drinking means

up to one drink a day for women and up to two drinks for men. For most adults, this amount causes few, if any problems.

Alcohol is high in calories, containing seven calories per gram. The average alcoholic drink has 150-200 calories per glass. A drink made with one ounce of vodka (40% to 50% alcohol) contains about 14 grams of alcohol and almost 100 calories. Adding mixers (e.g. soft drinks, tonic water, fruit juice or cream) to an alcoholic beverage can contribute calories in addition to the calories from the alcohol itself. For example, a pina colada has about 300 calories.

Control calories by ordering drinks with diet soda or club soda instead of juice and regular sodas. A 12-ounce soda has about 150 calories, diet soda has about 0-4 calories, and club soda is calorie-free. Consume ice water with a lemon slice between alcoholic drinks or as a non-alcoholic alternative.

Here are some standard servings of alcoholic beverages that contain the same amount of alcohol: 5 ounces of wine, 12 ounces of beer, or a mixed drink made with 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits (e.g. vodka, gin, rum and whiskey).

The following groups of people should not drink alcoholic beverages: women of childbearing age who may become pregnant; pregnant and lactating women; children and adolescents; individuals with specific medical conditions; individuals taking certain over-the-counter or prescription medications that can interact with alcohol; anyone engaging in activities that require attention, skill, or coordination (e.g. driving or operating machinery), and people who can't restrict their alcohol intake (e.g. recovering alcoholics).

Refer to [HGIC 4055, Moderate Alcohol](#) for more information on alcohol and cooking, alcohol and your health, and tips on drinking responsibly.

### **Modifying Holiday Recipes**

Enjoy a healthful guilt-free holiday by modifying the recipes for some of your favorite holiday foods to reduce the fat, sugar, and salt and to add fiber. These guidelines explain how to change certain ingredients and by how much.

**Fat:** You save about 120 calories for every tablespoon of oil you omit. Generally the total fat in recipes can be reduced by one-third. In recipes for baked breads, cakes and brownies that call for 1 cup of oil, you can replace ½ cup of the oil with ½ cup of unsweetened applesauce. Make sure you include 2 tablespoons of fat for every cup of flour in cakes and quick breads (e.g. muffins, biscuits and pancakes). Quick bread batters are leavened with baking powder or soda instead of yeast.

Reduce saturated fat in creamy dressing by mixing in nonfat or low-fat plain yogurt.

These lower fat ingredients can be substituted for higher fat ingredients:

- yogurt or cottage cheese for sour cream
- low-fat cheese for high-fat cheese
- skim, 1% or 2% milk for whole milk
- evaporated milk or whipped non-fat dry milk for whipping cream
- light cream (18-20% fat), half-and-half or evaporated skim milk for heavy cream (36-40% fat)
- lean or extra lean meats for regular fat meats
- applesauce or fruit puree for butter and margarine

Consider using a reduced fat or fat-free product. However, be aware that the liquid in a recipe must be reduced when using a product like reduced-fat margarine, which has water added to it.

Keep your total fat intake between 20 and 35% of daily calories (with less than 10% of calories from saturated fats), and keep trans fat consumption as low as possible.

**Sugar:** Reducing sugar by up to one-third usually yields good results, especially when vanilla, cinnamon or other appropriate flavoring is added to enhance the flavor. One tablespoon of sugar is needed for each cup of flour in recipes for quick breads and muffins. Use ½ cup of sugar for every cup of flour in cakes and cookies.

**Salt:** Most Americans consume about twice the amount of salt that the 2005 Dietary Guidelines recommends per day. On average, the higher a person's salt intake, the higher their blood pressure.

Eat more fresh foods and less processed items. Remove all salt from recipes if possible. Add special pizzazz to a recipe by replacing salt with citrus juices, vinegars, herbs, or salt-free spice blends. Sprinkle food with vinegar or citrus juice at the last minute so the flavor is at its strongest. If wine is used as a flavor enhancer, choose table wine rather than cooking wine, which has added sodium.

Although salt can be omitted from quick breads, baked goods containing yeast need it for leavening. The salt in main dishes, soups, salads and many other recipes can be omitted or reduced by one-half. Gradually reduce the salt each time the recipe is prepared, and the taste change will not be noticed. Use low-sodium versions of canned soups, bouillon cubes and commercial condiments.

**Flour:** The 2005 Dietary Guidelines recommend that we make half our grain choices whole grains. Try replacing one-fourth to one-half the white flour with whole grain or bran flour in recipes. Oat bran flour can replace one-fourth of the flour in a recipe. You can make your own by grinding oatmeal in a blender to a flour consistency. Although these changes don't save calories, they do add fiber and nutrient value.

**For More Information:** Refer to the following fact sheets for related information: [HGIC 4050, \*Fat in Your Diet\*](#); [HGIC 4052, \*Fiber\*](#); [HGIC 4053, \*Limit Sugar\*](#) and [HGIC 4054, \*Halt Salt!\*](#)

### **Tiny Tastes Add Up**

How many extra holiday calories do you think you eat by taking only a few "tiny tastes" throughout the day? The following food diary shows how those tastes really add up. The calories are approximate and will vary, depending on brand, recipe, exact serving size, etc.

**Taste 1:** OOPS! I broke that cookie removing it from the baking sheet. I'll just eat the half that didn't crumble. I deserve it for getting up early to bake before leaving for work. **Approximate calories: 30**

**Taste 2:** A coworker brought holiday candy to the office today. I'll just eat one small piece of this homemade peanut brittle. **Approximate calories: 80**

**Taste 3:** It's almost mid-afternoon and I haven't eaten lunch yet. I'm using my lunch break to pick up a few items at the grocery store before I swing through a fast food place for a quick bite. The grocery store is offering free food samples, so I'll just eat one small cracker with spread to tide me over until I get to lunch. **Approximate calories: 40**

**Taste 4:** The fast food place is giving out ¼ cup samples of its special flavored holiday coffee. I can't pass that up! **Approximate calories: 20**

**Taste 5:** I'm about to leave the office for the day, but it's still two hours before that holiday dinner tonight. I think I'll check the break room for new goodies. Wow! Some chocolate-covered cherries have appeared! Chocolate is good for me, right? I'll just have one. **Approximate calories: 60**

**Taste 6:** Maybe I shouldn't stand near the snack table before the dinner party starts. I'm now dipping my third chip. **Approximate calories: 75**

**Taste 7:** Who can pass up old-fashioned eggnog? I'll just have ½ cup. **Approximate calories: 200**

**Taste 8:** There are only two tablespoons of candied sweet potatoes left. I might as well enjoy it so it won't be thrown out. **Approximate calories: 60**

**Taste 9:** While helping dish up the dessert I think I'll take a little "preview" taste (using a separate tasting spoon, of course!). One heaping tablespoon of candy cane ice cream coming right up! **Approximate calories: 100**

**Total Tasting Calories for the Day: 665**

Source: *Tiny Tastes Can Total BIG Calories Over Winter Holidays* by Alice Henneman, University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension in Lancaster County.

Note: If you continue taking "tiny tastes," you could gain as much as a pound in a week! Consuming an extra 3,500 calories above what your body needs can lead to a one-pound weight gain.

## Test Your Weight Gain Knowledge

Take this fun quiz and find out how much you know about avoiding weight gain during the holidays.

1. How many excess calories does it take to gain one pound? a) 1500; b) 2500; c) 3500; d) 4500
2. Skipping meals is a good idea to conserve calories. a) true; b) false
3. How many grams of fat will you avoid eating by removing the skin from a 3-ounce serving of turkey breast? a) 1; b) 4; c) 6.6
4. What does a 3-ounce portion of turkey look like in relation to size? a) deck of cards; b) one set of dice; c) man's shoe
5. These holiday treats are fun to bake, but can really add up in calories because it is hard to eat just one. (Fill in the blank.) \_\_\_\_\_
6. According to the American Institute for Cancer Research, you should fill up about  $\frac{2}{3}$  of your plate with: a) plant foods such as whole grains, beans, vegetables and fruits; b) lean meat or fish; c) dessert
7. Eating plenty of (fill in the blanks) \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ will help you eat less fat and more fiber. You will feel fuller on fewer calories.
8. According to the National Weight Control Registry, people who lost 30 pounds or more and kept it off for at least a year did one of the following on a regular basis: a) exercised; b) watched TV; c) followed fad diets.

**Answers:** 1. c; 2. b (Skipping meals will lead to overeating.); 3. c; 4. a; 5. Cookies (Note: An unfrosted sugar cookie is usually your lowest calorie choice.); 6. a; 7. fruits and vegetables; 8. a.

Source: Communicating Food for Health, Nov/Dec 2002.

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