

Comfort Foods: Healthier Options

When the weather gets cooler and the leaves start turning beautiful colors, you may look forward to warm, rich and hearty comfort foods.

Unfortunately, they can wreck your diet and cause you to pack on extra pounds. Research shows that the average weight gain between November and January is at least a pound, which is usually permanent. You can hide an expanding waistline under layers of winter clothing, but the ugly truth will be revealed when you put on those spring fashions.

What is a Comfort Food?

A comfort food is any food or beverage that gives a comforting, satisfying feeling after you consume it. It provides temporary relief (e.g. stress relief) or a sense of emotional well-being (e.g. happiness, security or a reward). According to a Cornell University study, women find comfort in candy, chocolates and prepared snack foods, such as ice cream or potato chips. Men prefer hearty, home-cooked meals, like pasta, steak or casseroles.

There are no “bad” foods, although some foods are worse for you than others. Many rich, creamy comfort foods usually are filled with artery-clogging fat, sugar, sodium (salt), and numerous extra ingredients. You can splurge on an occasional small portion of a decadent food, but it’s better to completely avoid the temptation.

To prevent a craving for comfort food that is unhealthy, eat a balanced diet of foods that make you feel full and satisfied longer. This includes protein foods to stabilize blood sugars and high-fiber foods, which send the message “I’m full” to the brain.

Most Popular Comfort Foods of the Season

Although most spring and summer dishes are light and full of healthy, colorful, leafy vegetables, the most popular fall and winter foods are warm, rich and hearty dishes. The list includes: macaroni and cheese; chili and stews; cream- and cheese-based casseroles; cream-based soups, bisques and chowders; creamy pot pies with pastry on the top and bottom; fried side dishes (e.g. French fries, chili cheese fries and onion rings); mashed potatoes, and a variety of sweet treats (e.g. Halloween candy, chocolate, cookies, and pies topped with whipped cream or ice cream).

As you read the nutritional numbers on these comfort foods, remember that most adults need less than 2,000 calories, 65 grams of total fat, and 20 grams of saturated fat each day. Check out the healthier alternatives to these cold-weather favorites that cut the calories without sacrificing flavor and richness.

Macaroni & Cheese: This all-time top comfort food is loaded with fat. When eating out, substitute a more healthful side dish. One brand of macaroni and cheese has 529 calories, 25.7 grams of total fat, and 10.6 grams of saturated fat per 1½ cup serving. These numbers climb even higher as high-fat meats or sausage is added. Deep-fried mac and cheese is served as an appetizer at some restaurants!

Modify your recipe by using low-fat cheese and low-fat milk. Add vegetables to make it more nutritious and great tasting. Or, try whole-wheat elbow macaroni tossed with a cup of tomato sauce and 2 tablespoons of parmesan cheese (2 cups = 420 calories and 5 grams fat) instead of eating regular macaroni and cheese (2 cups = 880 calories and 40 grams fat).

Chili & Stews: Be cautious when eating out, because a bowl of chili at one popular restaurant chain contains 500 calories, 35 grams of total fat, and 15 grams of saturated fat. A bread bowl chili has 760 calories, 23 grams of total fat, and 7 grams of saturated fat. On the other hand, one fast food restaurant's famous chili contains only 220 calories, 6 grams of total fat, and 2.3 grams of saturated fat per cup (without cheese or crackers).

Chili and stews can be very hearty and high in protein. Use small portions of lean meat, lots of vegetables and beans, and then sprinkle a small amount of low-fat cheese on top. Limit high-fat ingredients like ground beef, sausage and cheese. Stews and soups become more delicious when refrigerated overnight to allow flavors to blend.

Cream- & Cheese-based Casseroles: Creamed, scalloped, and au gratin dishes like hash brown potato casserole begin with healthy ingredients, such as potatoes, broccoli and green beans. However, the calories can quadruple when you add cream, butter, and canned soups and top them with cheese, bacon, onions, breadcrumbs, or buttered crackers. That makes one serving of traditional hash brown casserole contain 568 calories, 40 grams of total fat, and 21 grams of saturated fat!

For a healthier cream- or cheese-based casserole, substitute low-calorie ingredients such as fat-free sour cream, low-fat cheese and reduced-fat soups. Better yet, try oven-roasted vegetables, such as new potatoes. They make a tasty, healthy side dish with only 100 calories and 4.5 grams of fat per 6 ounces.

Cream-based Soups, Bisques & Chowders:

Soups and chowders loaded with cream are high in calories, fat and sodium, especially if you add salty crackers or a cheese topping. A one-cup serving of a popular brand of lobster bisque has 380 calories, 27 grams of total fat, 16 grams of saturated fat, and 1,240 milligrams of sodium. New England clam chowder can contain up to 940 calories, 65 grams of total fat, and 34 grams of saturated fat per one-cup serving.

It is better to choose tomato-based or broth-based soups, like vegetable or minestrone. Enjoy soup as an appetizer or with a salad or a whole-wheat roll. Choose low-sodium canned soup, because regular soup usually contains a lot of salt and preservatives.

Creamy Pot Pies With Pastry on the Top & Bottom: Chicken pot pie with pastry on the bottom and top has about 780 calories, 47 grams of total fat, and 17 grams of saturated fat. Substitute a roasted chicken breast and a whole-wheat roll.

Fried Side Dishes: Sadly, the French fry, which is loaded with fat, calories and salt, is the most popular vegetable in the U.S. A six-ounce order of French fries at a fast food restaurant adds about 570 calories, 30 grams of total fat, and 6 grams of saturated fat to a meal. Chili cheese fries have 670 calories, 46 grams of total fat, and 15 grams of saturated fat, while onion rings have 750 calories, 39 grams of total fat, and 6 grams of saturated fat. A half-portion of a "blooming onion" appetizer at another restaurant packs on 1,355 calories, 101 grams of total fat, and 18 grams of saturated fat!

Choose a side salad with your entrée, and order a vegetable dish that is not fried.

Mashed Potatoes: The added milk and butter boost the caloric content to about 200 calories per half-cup serving. You can keep the rich creamy taste with a lot less fat by adding buttermilk instead of whole milk or cream.

Sweet Potatoes or Yams: For added flavor, some restaurants boil nutritious, low-calorie fall vegetables (e.g. sweet potatoes and butternut squash) in heavy cream instead of water, adding more calories and fat! Enjoy a plain baked sweet potato or yam, and eat the skin. Sweet potatoes are a good source of beta-carotene, potassium, vitamin C and fiber.

Sweet Potato Fries: Instead of a large order of French fries, eat baked sweet potato fries (220 calories and 0 grams fat). To make sweet potato fries, slice a large sweet potato into small sticks and spread the sticks on a baking sheet. Lightly coat with cooking spray, sprinkle with kosher salt and other seasonings, and bake at 375 °F for 20-25 minutes.

Candied Yams: Skip the traditional candied yams, which are high in sugar and fat. Bake yams with a small amount of brown sugar, and replace the butter with orange juice.

Pecans: Pecans are delicious raw or roasted. While a small handful contains about 200 calories, a slice of pecan pie may contain a whopping 700 calories. Pecans are high in protein and monounsaturated fats, and they are good sources of vitamin E and dietary fiber.

Pumpkin: This vegetable is a good source of potassium and fiber. It contains carotenoids for making vitamin A in the body and fighting free radicals.

To enjoy a rich pumpkin dessert without extra fat and calories, eat the pumpkin pie filling but pass up the crust. For a lower-fat pumpkin pie, use an egg substitute and evaporated skim milk. Pureed pumpkin can replace the fat in some baked goods. Beware of the pumpkin latte featured at a famous coffee shop, because it contains 510 calories and 20 grams of fat!

Stuffing: This high-carbohydrate companion to Thanksgiving turkey has 358 calories and 18 grams of fat per cup. Make a healthier stuffing using whole-grain bread for added fiber, vitamins and minerals. The latest U.S. Dietary Guidelines recommend three servings of whole grains a day.

Bake your stuffing in a casserole dish in the oven instead of inside the turkey. If turkey drippings are added, skim the fat off the top of the drippings before using. Refrigerating or freezing the drippings allows the fat and broth to separate. Replace at least half of the meat in the recipe with dried fruits (e.g. cranberries, raisins or apricots).

Turkey: Skinless white turkey meat has the least amount of fat per serving among all the meats. A three-ounce serving of skinless baked turkey has only 130 calories and is an excellent source of protein. Read the ingredients statement to make sure the turkey has not been injected with a sodium-based solution that increases the salt content.

Beware of Turducken, the new “combo” bird made of turkey, duck and chicken wrapped together. It contains 749 calories and 34.5 grams of fat per serving!

Apples: Limit high-calorie apple treats. A large candy apple coated in caramel has around 540 calories. A slice of apple pie has about 400 calories

and 20 grams of fat, and a scoop of ice cream on top boosts the total calories to 530. If you drink a warm cup of sweet apple cider, consider it a dessert rather than a beverage, because 16 ounces contains 200 calories.

Apples, which are somewhere in the 60-100 calorie range, are a good source of dietary fiber (not peeled), vitamin C and boron, an important trace mineral. Bake unpeeled apples, or make Waldorf salad with the whole apple. Choose unsweetened apple sauce, which contains fiber without added sugar. Use it to replace some of the fat in baked goods. Apple juice concentrate can be substituted for sugar in some baked products.

Sweet Treats: You may find yourself craving a variety of sweets, from candy to cookies to pie.

Halloween Candy: The calories in those “bite-size” Halloween treats add up quickly. Four small chocolate bars contain about 320 calories, 25 jelly beans have 140 calories, and 20 pieces of candy corn add up to 100 calories. There are other treats that are lower in fat and sugar but may provide vitamins, minerals and fiber. Examples include: cereal bars; trail mix; snack packets of dried fruit, baked pretzels, nuts and seeds; single serve boxes of ready-to-eat cereal, and mini boxes of raisins. For other nutritious trick-or-treat ideas and party foods, refer to [HGIC 4112, *Healthy Halloween Treats*](#).

Cookies: Most small cookies that weigh 1-2 ounces contain about 200-250 calories each, but who can eat only one? However, a 2.5-ounce shortbread cookie at a popular chain sandwich restaurant has 350 calories, 21 grams of fat, and 12 grams of saturated fat. CD-sized cookies pack a real caloric punch! The peanut butter cup cookie sold at a well-known donut bakery weighs 4.5 ounces and has 590 calories, 29 grams of fat, and 13 grams of saturated fat. If you must have a cookie, split one with a friend or take along your favorite 100-calorie pack of cookies.

Pies Topped With Ice Cream or Whipped Cream: Although these pies start with healthy ingredients, such as heart-healthy nuts or antioxidant-rich fruits, they also contain lots of calories, fat and sugar. Besides the ice cream or whipped cream topping, pies contain sweet fillings between two rich, buttery pie crusts. One restaurant’s coconut cream pie has

701 calories, 32 grams of fat, and 20 grams of saturated fat. Apple pie a la mode at another restaurant will set you back 1,203 calories, 53 grams of fat, and 23.7 grams of saturated fat. That equals the total daily calories in some weight loss plans. If you want to sample one of these desserts, eat only a sliver. Or, skip the crusts and substitute a dollop of light whipped topping for the whipped cream or ice cream.

Cheesecake: One slice of a chocolate-Oreo flavor of cheesecake has 1,050 calories, 71 grams of fat, and 34 grams of saturated fat. A pumpkin cream cheese muffin contains 490 calories, 24 grams of fat, and 6 grams of saturated fat. Try to satisfy your sweet tooth with a 150-calorie ice cream cone from the freezer section of your grocery store, or eat a peppermint for only 20 calories.

Chocolate: For an occasional treat, enjoy chocolate-dipped strawberries or other fruits, because chocolate and antioxidant-rich fruits make a pleasing combination. Chocolate contains flavanol antioxidants, which are plant substances that help reduce blood cholesterol levels.

When it comes to chocolate, choose dark. The darker the chocolate, the less fat and sugar it contains and the healthier it is for you. The most beneficial is dark chocolate that is at least 70% cocoa. Refer to [HGIC 4090, *When It Comes to Chocolate, Choose Dark*](#) for more health benefits of dark chocolate, some chocolate myths, and a nutritive comparison of different types of chocolate.

Recipe for Baked Apples & Sweet Potatoes

Here is a fall recipe that is sure to be a favorite, even with children. Other recipes using apples, sweet potatoes, pumpkins and winter squash are available at <http://www.mealsmatter.org/>.

2 cups baking apples
2 cups sweet potatoes
½ cup apple cider
¼ teaspoon salt
¾ teaspoon cinnamon
½ teaspoon nutmeg
¼ teaspoon ginger
1 tablespoon butter, melted
¼ cup brown sugar, firmly packed

Peel, core and cut apples into medium-sized pieces. Peel and cut sweet potatoes into small pieces. Toss all ingredients in a large mixing bowl and pour into deep baking dish. Cover and bake at 350 °F for 45-60 minutes, until tender (drain excess juice if necessary). Serve as a side dish with roasted turkey or other main course. Top with roasted pecans if desired.

Nutrient information per serving: 202 calories; 2.5g total fat; 1.3g saturated fat; 45g carbohydrates; 1.4g protein and 5g fiber.

More Ways to Make Comfort Foods Healthier

You can cut the calories, fat, sodium and/or sugar in other comfort foods without cutting the taste.

- **Shepherds' Pie:** Make Shepherds' pie with peas, turnips, carrots and ground turkey, which is leaner than ground beef. Top with mashed cauliflower instead of mashed potatoes.
- **Green Bean Casserole:** Make your green bean casserole with the lower-fat version of high-fat ingredients (e.g. fat-free cream of mushroom soup and light butter). Better yet, skip the casserole and lightly toss green beans with some olive oil and lemon juice instead.
- **Fruit Crumble:** To satisfy a sweet tooth, eat one of fall's fresh fruits, including apples, apricots and cranberries. Make a fruit crumble with sliced fruit (e.g. apples, plum, peaches or nectarines) topped with some brown sugar and fiber-rich oats. Or, try some beets roasted in the oven for extra sweetness.
- **Hot Chocolate:** Mix up some hot chocolate made with chocolate whey protein powder and warm low-fat or fat-free milk.
- **Salty Treat:** If you are craving salt, eat some salted almonds, feta with sun-dried tomatoes or vegetables and hummus.
- **Pizza:** Replace 2 slices of restaurant pizza (1,300 calories and 50 grams fat) with homemade pita pizza with vegetables (250 calories and 6 grams fat).
- **Pita Chips:** Make your own pita chips by cutting whole wheat pita bread into pieces and toasting them in a toaster oven or broiler. Optional: Brush with a small

amount of extra virgin olive oil and sprinkle with sea salt.

- **Alternative for Fried Chicken Wings:** Eat baked chicken tenderloins with hot sauce and low-calorie blue cheese dressing (120 calories and 1.5 grams fat) instead of fried chicken wings with blue cheese dressing (720 calories and 59 grams fat).

When you cut back on fat in foods, they sometimes become bland in taste. Experiment with adding different spices and herbs until you get the correct quantities and combinations.

Tips to Avoid Winter Weight Gain

In addition to limiting the most fattening foods, follow these tips to avoid winter weight gain.

- Drink plenty of water between meals and at mealtimes.
- Eat tomato-based and broth-based soups and stews that contain lots of vegetables and are low in sodium. Broth-based soup eaten as an appetizer can fill you up so that you eat fewer calories during the meal.
- Eat plenty of lean protein to feel full and satisfied.
- Use only lean meats in soups, casseroles and other dishes, and limit portion sizes.
- Replace high-fat ingredients with spices and peppers to add pizzazz to your food.
- Use low-fat milk or fat-free half-and-half instead of cream in recipes.
- Replace each whole egg in a recipe with 2 egg whites.
- Simplify your menus and limit food choices so that you aren't tempted to eat everything.
- Stick to your routine during the holiday season. If you splurge on comfort foods at a special meal or party, get your diet right back on track the next day.
- Get at least 30 minutes of physical activity every day to stay fit and to keep your metabolism perking. Exercise is a great non-food way to reduce stress.

- Get plenty of natural sunlight. Winter's shorter days and longer nights may bring on fatigue, depression, and cravings for sweets and starches. Take a walk outside to lift your mood and to give your body a chance to produce vitamin D. This may take as little as 15 minutes of sun exposure on arms and face, without sunscreen, twice a week.
- It is easier to keep your weight stable than to lose weight. You can lose weight, or at least maintain your weight, by eating 100 calories less than your body burns each day. On the other hand, you will gain about 10 pounds in a year by eating 100 extra calories a day.

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