



'Tis the Season

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"It's the most wonderful time of the year. With the kids jingle belling, and everyone telling you, 'Be of good cheer,' It's the most wonderful time of the year. There'll be parties for hosting, marshmallows for toasting..." (Eddie Pola, George Wyle, 1963)

The holidays are a great time to go on vacation, spend time with loved ones and enjoy the seasonal festivities. It's also a time when people travel, fall out of their routines and subsequently consume foods that are not aligned with their nutrition goals. This is particularly troublesome for those living with chronic health issues such as diabetes, food allergies, gastrointestinal conditions, kidney disease, metabolic problems and obesity.

With two-thirds of the U.S. adult population being overweight or obese,¹ most people will agonize over their waistline and about how to manage potentially stressful social interactions. Although scientists report that there is only a slight increase in body weight (approximately 1.1 pounds) after the Thanksgiving holiday,² there's often a significant increase in percent of body fat from before Thanksgiving to after New Year's Eve.³ The focus of this article is to review the new U.S. Department of Agriculture's MyPyramid, and describe healthy eating strategies that will assist readers in optimizing their intake during the most wonderful time of the year.

Tip #1: Develop a Plan of Action—There's Still Time!

To promote healthy holiday eating, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggests balancing the calories you consume with the calories you burn. It's easy, right? Simply make moderate food choices and be physically active (30 minutes or more per day). Easier said than done. A good starting point is to consider what things in life are controllable and what factors are uncontrollable. For example, if you are planning a vacation and have control over choosing the location, consider planning a retreat that

offers activities. That walking tour of the vineyards in Tuscany will do, but there are many other local and inexpensive options available. If the location is already determined by family commitments, you can still think about what you can do to make it a more active vacation. The CDC suggests bringing along your sneakers or snow shoes, taking a brisk walk or wheel around the neighborhood to see the holiday decorations (bundle up!), playing Frisbee with children and adults before the big dinner. Of course, some things will be out of your control, like sitting on the tarmac for hours as you become ravenous ... and those are the things you try not to worry about.

So, what can you control? Can you imagine yourself at the event? How might you react when you are standing before a table of turkey with gravy, sausage stuffing, sweet potatoes with caramelized marshmallow and pecan pie? It is essential to plan to be realistic about what you want to accomplish. Set reasonable and attainable goals during the holidays and set yourself up for success. For example, focus on weight maintenance and balanced eating rather than weight

Figure 1. Develop a plan of action, make healthy food choices and cultivate social support.



¹ CDC National Center for Health Statistics. Prevalence of overweight and obesity among adults: United States, 2003-2004. URL: www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/overwt.htm.

² Hull HR, Duncan R, Dinger M, Fields DA. The effect of the Thanksgiving Holiday on weight gain. *Nutrition Journal*. 2006; Nov 21;5:29.

³ Hull HR, Hester CN, Fields DA. The effect of the holiday season on body weight and composition in college students. *Nutr Metab*. 2006; Dec 28;3:44.

to Eat Healthier



loss and food restriction during the holidays. What follows are some additional behavioral strategies that might enable you to achieve your goals or help a loved one to optimize healthful eating during the holidays:

- Avoid starting a diet on Jan. 1. Such promises often excuse a binge in advance of a restrictive diet that is unlikely to last. Long-term weight management requires new habit formation and not a diet that has a specific start or end date. Consistency of food intake throughout the week and weekends predicts long-term weight loss maintenance.⁴ Seek support from a nutrition or behavioral counselor, or disease specific support group, for long-term habit formation.
- Try not to create “forbidden” foods unless it is medically necessary. This does not mean that all foods can be eaten with impunity. Rather, certain controlled amounts of favorite treats can be eaten as part of a balanced diet.
- Focus on an overall diet for the meal rather than on “good” or “bad” foods. In moderation, almost all foods can be incorporated into a healthful diet.

However, keep in mind that a long-term pattern of poor choices could cause dietary imbalances that contribute to obesity, diabetes, heart disease and so on.

- Don’t let “sometimes” foods, such as that bag of Halloween candy or leftover pie, become “everyday” foods. When you have leftovers, send these foods home with others or offer them as a gift of appreciation to your co-workers, nurses, household helpers and teachers. Some of our families may be ill or in the hospital during this time. Support caregivers with food. (Be sure to follow food safety guidelines.)
- If you allow your child(ren) to collect candy from the community, or you hand out candy and have leftovers, decide on an appropriate number of candies that may be consumed and donate or throw away the rest.
- Offer alternatives to candy on the holidays. One study showed that “children choose toys as often as candy when offered both on Halloween.”⁵ So don’t worry that children will be disappointed by toy treats on Halloween. It is possible to create holiday traditions that do not rely on unhealthful foods.

- Be mindful of the reasons and meaning behind celebrating the holidays together. Sharing food and feasting may be one tradition, but you can try to incorporate other things to make the season special. For example, bring photographs or stories to share, have an ornament exchange, decorate the Christmas tree, play a game of dreidel, bring out the instruments or check in with a loved one. Look for a quiet moment to ask how they are feeling.
- Offer to bring a dish to the event. This way, you will know that there is at least one dish that is safe for you or family members who might have special dietary needs.
- Give the host gifts that promote health. If children are present, bring items such as hover discs, jump rope, volleyball, roller skates, etc. Baskets of flowers, organic produce, dried fruits, teas and nuts are always thoughtful gifts.
- If you graze, try to munch on healthy foods such as fresh-cut vegetables and fruits rather than the holiday rum balls and cream cheese rugelach.
- If you are staying with family or friends, discuss your needs in advance. ➤

⁴ Gorin AA, Phelan S, Wing RR, Hill JO. Promoting long-term weight control: does dieting consistency matter? *Int J Obes Relat Metab Disord.* 2004 Feb;28(2):278-8.

⁵ Schwartz MB, Chen EY, Brownell KD. Trick, treat, or toy: children are just as likely to choose toys as candy on Halloween. *J Nutr Educ Behavior.* 2003;35:207-209.

How do you know if you're at a healthy weight?

Overweight and obesity are names used to indicate when an individual's weight is not considered healthy for his or her height. A body mass index (BMI) is used to identify ranges of weight that have been linked to health problems.

To determine whether you are under, over or at a healthy weight, go to the CDC's BMI Calculator at www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/index.htm.

Tip #2: Make Healthy Food Choices and Celebrate the Event!

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has replaced the Food Guide Pyramid with MyPyramid as nutrition guidance for the general public.⁶ MyPyramid is not a therapeutic diet for any one health condition, rather it is a more individualized and up-to-date version of the Food Guide Pyramid. For example, greater amounts of fruits, vegetables and whole grains are recommended, and more specificity is provided regarding types of fat. Also, its guidelines are consistent with recommendations for managing obesity, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, cancer and osteoporosis.

- Find the pyramid that is right for you by visiting www.mypyramid.gov. Create your own profile of foods based on your unique calorie needs. The MyPyramid recommendations provide sample diets that are nutritionally adequate. MyPyramid is designed for people 2 years old and older who are not on a therapeutic diet for

specific health states. Those with a chronic disease should consult with a healthcare provider to find a dietary plan that is right for them.

- Make half your grains whole.
- Vary your veggies.
- Focus on fruits, go easy on fruit juices.
- Get your calcium-rich foods, but go low fat or fat free.
- Know your fats, and consume most of your fats from fish, nuts and vegetable oils.
- Go lean on protein by choosing low-fat or lean cuts of poultry and meat.
- Integrate the turkey into other healthy dishes. Add some pieces to mixed greens, cucumbers, avocado, tomato or any other salad topping you like.
- Try eating or serving an alternative such as a grilled fish that is high in omega-3s (linked to reduction in inflammatory processes). There is no commandment that says you must have turkey and gravy or ham on the holidays.
- Focus on variety, moderation and balance of foods at events. Be aware of serving sizes.
- Be cognizant of recreational eating and, if you are noshing on empty calorie foods (i.e., high-fat or sugar foods that are low in nutrients), position yourself away from the buffet tables or food tray. Encountering high-risk eating situations, such as those during the holidays, may be better navigated if one is self-monitoring and aware of the surroundings.
- Drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration (or as directed by your physician). It is easy for your sensation of thirst to be dampened when you are traveling, socializing, distracted and out of your routine.
- Eat a healthy snack in advance of showing up at the event to curb your appetite.
- Enjoy the season! Slow down and pay attention to what you are eating and drinking.
- Choose beverages wisely. If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation (approximately two standard drinks for a man and one drink for a woman). Making good food choices is all about being cognizant of the foods that you are consuming. Alcohol diminishes good judgment and it is high in empty calories (the body metabolizes alcohol like a fat).
- It is advisable to abstain from alcohol when using prescription or over-the-counter medications.

Tip #3: Encourage Social Support — Help Promote Healthy Eating Behavior

Although there has been discussion in the media about the impact of genetics on weight, changes in the physical and social environment also lead to healthy eating or excess

⁶ Krebs-Smith S, Kris-Etherton P. How does MyPyramid compare to other population-based recommendations for controlling chronic disease? *J Am Diet Assoc.* 2007;107:830-7.

caloric intake and weight gain. Certain times of the year may discourage the development of optimal dietary patterns, and social support can help, or hinder, healthy eating behaviors.

- Keep holiday cooking safe. Follow the basic food safety steps as outlined in the article, "Food Safety: Home for the Holidays" in the December-January 2007 issue of *IG Living*.
- Wash your hands frequently for 20 seconds (about the length of time it takes to hum "We Wish You a Merry Christmas"). Frequent hand washing is one of the best ways to prevent the spread of germs. It's the combination of the soap and scrubbing action that helps dislodge and remove germs. When traveling, use soapless hand gels as directed.
- Be sensitive to guests who have special dietary needs. Acknowledging needs, rather than minimizing them, is a courteous and inexpensive gift that we can offer to caregivers. It is not easy to ask for help or support, so try to move toward accommodating the caregiver rather than pulling them toward someone else's agenda. For example, telling Gina that little Bobby is going to be "just fine" without taking steps to remove an allergic ingredient from her pecan pie is not in the holiday spirit. In another case, readers may be caring for patients with severe immune problems. A child may be regaining certain freedoms after a bone marrow transplant, so attending a holiday event requires extra caution on the part of the host and guests.

- Respect the privacy, and try to honor the wishes, of an individual who must follow a restrictive diet during the holidays.
- Be aware that genetics and the environment both play a role in whether or not an individual is satiated after eating a meal. Leptin (a hormone released by fat cells) suppresses food intake and can diminish the reward effect or pleasure that is associated with food. People have varying levels of this hormone. Consider offering healthy choices for the grazers and make it easy for guests to engage in activities unrelated to post-meal feeding.
- Don't let anyone drink and drive. According to the CDC, alcohol-related motor vehicle crashes kill someone every half hour.
- Ask how you can help and show responsibility toward one another. Be prepared to listen to a friend

or loved one share anxiety or frustrations.

- Accentuate the positive. A disinterested or marginally involved partner or spouse will increase the likelihood that an individual will fail to adhere to a nutrition plan.
- Assist a working parent in making healthful foods for his or her family gatherings.

"There'll be much mistletoeing and hearts will be glowing, when loved ones are near. It's the most wonderful time of the year."
(Eddie Pola, George Wyle 1963)

Happy Holidays! ■

This article is intended for general informational purposes only. Individuals with a chronic condition should consult their physician to determine what eating pattern is appropriate for them. The author is a credentialed dietitian, holds a doctorate in health behavior, and is a visiting scholar in the Department of Psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles.

