

Happy Healthy Holidays

by Katrina Mayer, Ph.D.

If statistics are accurate, most of us will be gaining extra pounds over the next few months. The holidays are a joyful time filled with friends, music, gift and lots of food. There's eggnog, turkey, stuffing, ham, mashed potatoes, cookies, cakes, chips, dip, cheese, crackers, salami, pepperoni, and let's not forget the razzleberry dressing. So, how do we avoid the extra pounds?

The simplest way is to eat less. But, let's be serious. Holidays and eating go hand-in-hand. Those special cookies that Aunt Maggie makes once a year just won't be denied. And what about that pumpkin pie?

With that in mind, how do we keep the scale from edging higher while still enjoying some very dear holiday traditions? How do we make better choices without feeling deprived?

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Since there probably won't be any zero-calorie, heart-healthy cheesecake invented during our lifetimes, let's consider some other alternatives.

Appetizer—Buy a few containers of hummus (it comes in many different flavors) and cut up carrots, celery, cucumbers, peppers and radishes. There are far fewer calories in hummus than an onion sour cream dip. And it's much lower in fat. The veggies are crunchy and healthier than chips. My favorite is jalapeno hummus, which really makes your tongue dance.

If hummus isn't your thing, try some fresh salsa or guacamole. You will not even notice that your other dip is missing.

Salad—News flash! The reason why most people pass by the salad at the holiday meal is because it's boring, boring, boring. Iceberg lettuce, pale tomatoes, and a few token

cucumber slices do not a salad make. Another news flash! Canned chickpeas do not really make it more exciting. Let's start over. Salads should be fun, tasty and very colorful. Get a big bag of pre-washed, organic, green lettuce. Anything with arugula in it is extra special. Cut up a yellow and red pepper and grate a fresh carrot. Do you see where we are going? Add some purple cabbage, red tomatoes, sliced cucumber, olives, raw sunflower seeds, tangerine segments, apples, pears... WOW! Now that's a salad. Throw a nice, light vinaigrette on top with fresh dill and you are set. No one will pass up a big, healthy serving of that salad.

Main Meal—The best words of wisdom for your main holiday meal are "remember to breathe." If the food is piled more than a foot above your plate, and it's gone in three minutes, you will be in trouble. You should not have to count your fingers to see if any are missing after your meal. Always start with a small serving of each item and eat slowly. Savor each mouthful. Chew everything and really taste it. See how many spices you can identify as you eat. Put down your fork once in a while. And please remember to breathe throughout the meal.

For all the vegetarians out there who feel left out around the holidays, get the "unturkey" alternative at the nearest health food store. The holiday tofurky dinner has become a tradition at quite a few households. And it comes complete with stuffing and vegetarian gravy. What more could you want?

Dessert—Okay. Here's the tough one. Even if you have been good up to this point, how do you stay away from all those wonderful desserts? Whatever you choose to do, remember moderation, and remember your fruit. Take a small slice of pie and some fresh fruit. Try a tiny piece of cake, and some fresh fruit. Have a dollop of pudding, and some fresh fruit. Make a big, organic, fresh fruit salad the centerpiece of your dessert table. Squeeze a couple of fresh oranges over it to keep the apples and pears from turning brown. Scatter some chopped walnuts on top and you are good to go.

Cookies—Many of us have followed a tradition of baking holiday cookies each year. We take out the bell, star and snowman cookie cutters and stock up on food coloring and sprinkles. And while the cookies taste pretty good, there are often just too many to eat. Our coworkers, neighbors, family and friends have all made dozens upon dozens of cookies that are exchanged and consumed until we are stuffed.

Make this holiday special by giving yourself a gift...the gift of healthy choices.

Be a little different. Break out of the mold. Be the first one on the block to make some trail mix and put it in holiday cellophane baggies with ribbons tied on top. Start with granola and add as many of the following ingredients as you like. You can use raisins, chopped dates, walnuts, dried cranberries, sunflower seeds, carob chips, pine nuts, dried apricots, etc. Have fun. People will love it. And you will feel better without all the extra sugar, butter and eggs in your body.

After Dinner—When everyone is tempted to take a snooze in front of the television, get bundled up and take a walk around the block, on the nearest boardwalk, or park trail. Wrap the kids up in their scarves and mittens. Get Granny into her new winter coat and take a walk. The dishes can definitely wait until you get back. It's more important that you get fresh air and stretch your muscles. And walking with others is so much fun. You can laugh, tell stories and burn a few calories all at once.

Don't wait for the New Year. Make this holiday special by giving yourself a gift...the gift of healthy choices. You will be happy that you did.