

How to Keep Your Weight in Check During The Holidays

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Ah, the holidays! A time for giving and receiving, getting closer with the ones we love, and marking the end of another year, for better or for worse. While the stores may be packed to the doors and back, and traffic is enough to send even the jolliest of elves into a steaming fit of frustration, we tolerate it and even celebrate it because of the joys inherent in our festivities and traditions.

Of course, one of those traditions, part and parcel with almost every celebration regardless of culture, is eating. We eat because the food is yummy and plentiful and because we believe that since it's the holidays, calories don't count this time of year. If only that was true!

So, many of us eat our way through the holiday season, even as we plan to make "losing weight" one of our primary New Year's resolutions. But of course this overindulgence only makes it harder on us when the New Year rolls around. Instead of having fifteen pounds to lose, we might have twenty or twenty five. And since studies show that most resolutions are smashed into pieces by mid-January, the chances are greater than ever that our holiday weight will simply remain a part of us long after the trees have come down and the presents have been discarded. So, is there really a foolproof way to stop this terrible cycle?

It goes without saying that no decent strategy for weight loss (or even weight maintenance) was ever borne without a consistent and thorough plan. We don't set out into the hordes of mass consumerism without some idea of what we're going to buy for our friends and family, and we shouldn't begin the holiday season without a strict plan of how we're going to conquer the rise of the scale. With all of those cookies, candies, fudge, buffet-style dinners, delicious breakfasts, and never-ending snacks, we would be foolish to simply wing it. If you go in unprepared, you stand a much greater chance of failing before you even begin! Thankfully, it doesn't take General Patton to create an easy and effective way to keep the pounds off, while still managing to enjoy the holiday season and a sampling of the foods that come along with it.

The Three-Pronged Attack

The best strategy and plan for keeping the weight off through the holiday season is to develop a three-pronged face of attack. Now, you may already be backing away from the computer, shaking your head, and thinking about grabbing a couple of cookies from the kitchen. You may be thinking: "Heck, if I spend too much time on planning, it would be a boring holiday." There is no need to sweat it. This plan is easy, fun to implement, and won't require a graphing calculator or even a chalkboard. There are three simple things you can do to ensure the scale doesn't continue to show you an unwanted number of pounds at the end of each week.

Go to War With Your Best Weapon: Exercise.

Just the very look of yummy cookies, cakes, fudges and all that food can send even the strictest sense of willpower flying out the window. There's not only the temptation of its savory deliciousness, but there are matters of politeness and camaraderie to be taken into account as well. No one wants to turn down Aunt Flo's legendary Christmas cookies because "I'm on a diet." You don't want to sit around a coffee table spread with goodies, pouting while everyone else partakes to their heart's desire. (What's with your brother? Does he ever gain weight? Is it even scientifically possible to eat that much and remain skinny?) So in order to avoid making yourself a holiday outcast, you'll have to do something to burn those excess calories you're taking in while your team loses badly in a game of Pictionary. The answer is, of course, exercise.

For many of us, lack of activity goes as hand in hand with the holidays as the food itself. Besides shopping, many of us seem to take a break from the more strenuous tasks in our lives during that three or four week stretch. This means you're not only consuming extra calories, but you're also burning less of them than at any other time, and that's a golden way to gain weight. Thankfully, exercise doesn't have to be very time consuming or even very difficult. If you've been lazy about getting some exercise because you don't have the energy or don't think you have the time, it's time to suck it up, and make time.

The best plan of exercise is a combination of walking and resistance training. If you have just thirty minutes a day, you can hit the treadmill or even the streets outside your house for a brisk walk, those holiday goodies won't stand a chance. If you can pair that with a trip to the gym a few times a week for some light weight lifting, or even a plan of simple push-ups and other body weight-resistance exercises around the house, you'll come out on the other side of the holidays looking better than you did going in. What better present could you get for yourself?

It's Christmas, Not Foodmas

Who says the holidays have to be about food, anyway? Yes, the two have gone hand in hand ever since the Three Wise Men traveled the desert bearing fruitcake and s'mores (or something like that. . .), but that doesn't mean it has to be that way. If you have some control over how your family celebrates the holidays, you can use that influence to lead your family and friends into activities that don't involve food. It won't keep your skinny pig of a brother from making quick dashes into the other room to stuff his face with more fudge, but it can't at least take the focus off of eating and onto fun.

There are a plethora of things to do with your friends and family that don't put food as the focus of the season. Taking things outside might be a good start. It seems to be a natural human fact that we eat less when we're outdoors. And it is even more of a natural fact that we eat less if we're engrossed in activities that require the use of our hands or mouths. No one wants to sit around and wait for someone to finish chewing before taking their turn in a game, after all. If you rouse up a really physical game, like some volleyball in the yard or something similarly active, there won't be a chance for anyone to eat, and you'll get your dose of exercise. Kill two birds with one stone, and you can take the day off from the gym! Now we're talking REAL, right?

Of course, not everyone will cherish the idea of playing volleyball in three feet of snow (the humbugs), so there are plenty of activities that can be done within the warmth of the house and still keep your mind away from the thought of consuming calorie-rich food products. You could, for example, organize a marathon of holiday films to sit and watch (though this is a dangerous activity for those who tend to eat when the TV is on, so be wary of your weaknesses), or bring out the old Monopoly board. Yes, it will likely end with someone accusing someone else of cheating and hitting them in the head with that tiny metal shoe, but at least you won't be getting fatter. Besides it will be something to laugh about next year, when the shoe thrower isn't invited back.

Not Every Holiday is a Time for Joy-How To Prevent Emotional Eating

Till now we have discussed about how to resist the temptation to eat while you are happy and surrounded by family. Perhaps the only temptation that is harder to resist is that of eating when lonely and missing someone who should have been with you this holiday season. Studies have shown that depression rears its ugly head more often and with more intensity during the holidays than at any other time. And it's no wonder. If you're without someone this year, or if the year wasn't good to you and the following one don't look much better, it can be very easy to get down in the dumps. Everyone seems so happy and excited, and all you want to do is turn off the lights and climb under the covers until there's not a reindeer in sight.

Depression is, of course, one of the most powerful triggers to overeating. For many of us, eating good food simply makes us feel better. It is, unfortunately, only a temporary fix. When the cookies are nothing but crumbs and there are three empty boxes of cheese crackers littering the countertop, we can feel worse than ever, knowing what's waiting for us when we get up the courage to step onto the scale. It's a vicious circle, and there's only one way to break it - you have to look for other means to make your doldrums go away and let the happiness wink through. Food isn't the answer to every problem or sorrow, any more than alcohol is. Here are some things you can do to fight off the emotional desire to eat and have something to really feel good about when the New Year rolls around in a few weeks.

If you don't live in a frozen tundra, get outside and go for a walk. This isn't like the walk from before –the one that you were doing for exercise. This walk doesn't need to be brisk, or even consistent. It can simply be a leisurely stroll through the neighborhood, or along the beach, or through the woods. You may not be aware of it, but fresh air has amazing curative powers on our body and mind!

Get together with friends and family as often as possible. Being with others, laughing and carrying on can be a great way to take your mind off the things that are bothering you the most. If you don't have this kind of a support system, check the paper for public holiday functions you can attend. Chances are your city is throwing more of them than you know. Simply show up by yourself and surround yourself with the festivities. Even being around strangers and partaking in the mirth can lift at least a corner of your depression curtain.

Putting It All Together

With the three pronged attack in place, you stand a much better chance than ever this year of avoiding holiday pounds. When the tree is back in the attic (or at the local dump) and we've all returned to work, wouldn't it be nice to look at yourself in the mirror and congratulate yourself on not putting on a single pound? It can happen, as long as you stick to the plan.

First, there's the exercise, which can be as simple as taking a walk each day, or even every other day. Set up your iPod with your favorite songs (holiday-themed or not) and get out into the great wide open. If the great wide open isn't your bag, head to the gym or buy a treadmill to do your walking indoors. Studies have shown that walking for at least thirty minutes in your target heart rate is amazingly effective in the battle of the bulge. When you combine the walking with some resistance training, you've set up what amounts to a defensive army against the attacking calories.

Then there's the control over your family activities. Whether it takes the form of outdoor sports, indoor movie watching, or game play, anything you can do to take the focus off of food is a good thing. Does this mean cancelling your special holiday dinner? Of course not! We're simply talking about shifting the focus from food to the reason for the holidays in the first place: the camaraderie and love between friends and family. Food is just there as a garnishment. As long as it stays that way and doesn't become the main reason for the gathering, the holidays (and your waistline) will be a lot better off.

Finally, if you have a tendency to get sad during the holidays, find some things to take your mind off food and put yourself in better spirits. This could be seeking out friends or even strangers in order to partake in holiday events. Or it could be as simple as going outside and breathing in some cool, fresh air and letting the glow of the sun shine on your face. Just try to avoid hitting the cookie jar too often. Remember that far from soothing your mind, food is only going to aggravate your health and mar your happiness.

When it all comes together, you've got yourself a winning plan for staying slim and trim through the holidays. Whenever it seems like it's getting too hard, just think about the smile you'll have on your face when everyone else is complaining that their pre-holiday dresses and pants don't fit anymore. In the meantime, yours don't either, but for the opposite reason. Come on, if that's not a holiday miracle, what is?

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