Six Tips for Avoiding Holiday Weight Gain

Forget denial: these six science-based strategies will help you enjoy the season healthily without packing on the pounds.

There are countless opportunities to pile on extra pounds during the holiday season. If you're anything like me, it's difficult to turn down all that scrumptious food and drink. And guess what? You shouldn't! Forget denial and follow these science-based strategies to enjoy the season healthfully without making that tired resolution to lose the weight come the first of the year.

1. Eat Mindfully

It takes time for our brains to respond to satiety signals that say "Stop eating! You're full!" They're either drowned out by our desire for more yumminess or because we are not giving our body the chance to react. The holiday season is meant to be savored, so enjoy each delectable dish to its fullest by eating mindfully. Chew slowly and focus on the experience. As a result, you'll eat less food overall and have fewer stomachaches from overconsumption. Perhaps consider following the Okinawan adage "Hara Hachi Bu," which roughly translates to "eat until you're 80% full." After all, traditional dietary practices like these have helped Okinawans become one of the longest-lived populations in the world.

2. Drink Water

Liquid calories contribute significantly to our daily energy intake, especially during the holiday season when tasty libations abound. Our bodies aren't great at recognizing that calories in liquid form contribute to fullness, so we tend to pack them on as extra. Choosing water rather than an alcoholic or sugar-sweetened beverage means you're consuming fewer calories. Extra-added bonus: you're less likely to be "that person" at the office holiday party. (You're welcome.)

3. Focus on Veggies and Fruits

Holiday treats tend to be loaded in calories and rarely feature lighter fare like vegetables and fruits. "Eat more plants" may sound like tired advice, but there are so many festive ways to prepare plant-based dishes for your holiday table that help boost nutrition and keep calories in check. Think: spinach salad with ruby-red pomegranates and crunchy toasted almonds; roasted butternut squash with crimson cranberries and caramelized onions; or spicy arugula with figs and pine nuts in a zesty vinaigrette. And why not feature fruit for dessert, like red wine poached pears with blackberries?

4. Select Smaller Plates and Cups

Selecting smaller plates and cups leads to less food and drink consumed. Try setting your holiday table with smaller place settings. Choosing smaller plates is especially important in a buffet situation, which is a recipe for over-indulgence given all of the tasty choices for the taking. And smaller portions also means you're more likely to finish what's on your plate, which means less food waste.

5. Watch Your Weight

Weight gain occurs incrementally, and stepping on a scale either daily or several times a week is the easiest way to tell whether you're holiday feasting has gone awry. Weight gain around the waist is especially harmful because of its inflammatory effect, so keeping track of how your clothes fit throughout the season is also key.

6. Get Out and Play

Weight gain is, ultimately, a simple equation: consuming more calories than you're burning will lead to the storage of energy as body fat. So, the other side of energy balance—physical activity—needs to be on the list. Maintaining a fitness routine is a challenge during the holiday season, but the fact remains that we should actually *increase* our activity to offset the extra calories we're consuming. Figure out what works for you and stick to it. And if stuff gets in the way, don't beat yourself up; just get back out there when you can.

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