

10 Tips for a Thinner Thanksgiving

Enjoy the holiday feast without the guilt -- or the weight gain.

By Kathleen M. Zelman, MPH, RD, LD

Thanksgiving only comes around once a year, so why not go ahead and splurge? Because gaining weight during the holiday season is a national pastime. Year after year, most of us pack on at least a pound (some gain more) during the holidays -- and keep the extra weight permanently.

But Thanksgiving does not have to sabotage your weight, experts say. With a little know-how, you can satisfy your desire for traditional favorites and still enjoy a guilt-free Thanksgiving feast. After all, being stuffed is a good idea only if you are a turkey!

Get Active

Create a calorie deficit by exercising to burn off extra calories before you ever indulge in your favorite foods, suggests Connie Diekman, MEd, RD, former president of the American Dietetic Association (ADA).

"'Eat less and exercise more' is the winning formula to prevent weight gain during the holidays," Diekman says. "Increase your steps or lengthen your fitness routine the weeks ahead and especially the day of the feast."

Make fitness a family adventure, recommends Susan Finn, PhD, RD, chair of the American Council on Fitness and Nutrition: "Take a walk early in the day and then again after dinner. It is a wonderful way for families to get physical activity and enjoy the holiday together."

Eat Breakfast

While you might think it makes sense to save up calories for the big meal, experts say eating a small meal in the morning can give you more control over your appetite. Start your day with a small but satisfying breakfast -- such as an egg with a slice of whole-wheat toast, or a bowl of whole-grain cereal with low-fat milk -- so you won't be starving when you arrive at the gathering.

"Eating a nutritious meal with protein and fiber before you arrive takes the edge off your appetite and allows you to be more discriminating in your food and beverage choices," says Diekman.

Lighten Up

Whether you are hosting Thanksgiving dinner or bringing a few dishes to share, make your recipes healthier with less fat, sugar, and calories.

"There is more sugar and fat in most recipes than is needed, and no one will notice the difference if you skim calories by using lower calorie ingredients," says Diekman.

Her suggestions:

- Use fat-free chicken broth to baste the turkey and make gravy.
- Use sugar substitutes in place of sugar and/or fruit purees instead of oil in baked goods.
- Reduce oil and butter wherever you can.
- Try plain yogurt or fat-free sour cream in creamy dips, mashed potatoes, and casseroles.

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Police Your Portions

- Thanksgiving tables are bountiful and beautiful displays of traditional family favorites. Before you fill your plate, survey the buffet table and decide what you're going to choose. Then select reasonable-sized portions of foods you cannot live without.

"Don't waste your calories on foods that you can have all year long," suggests Diekman. "Fill your plate with small portions of holiday favorites that only come around once a year so you can enjoy desirable, traditional foods."

- Skip the Seconds.

Try to resist the temptation to go back for second helpings.

"Leftovers are much better the next day, and if you limit yourself to one plate, you are less likely to overeat and have more room for a delectable dessert," Diekman says.

- Choose the Best Bets on the Buffet.

While each of us has our own favorites, keep in mind that some holiday foods are better choices than others.

"White turkey meat, plain vegetables, roasted sweet potatoes, mashed potatoes, defatted gravy, and pumpkin pie tend to be the best bets because they are lower in fat and calories," says Diekman. But she adds that, "if you keep your portions small, you can enjoy whatever you like."

Eating slowly, putting your fork down between bites, and tasting each mouthful is one of the easiest ways to enjoy your meal and feel satisfied with one plate full of food, experts say. Choosing whole grains, fruits, vegetables, broth-based soups, salads, and other foods with lots of water and fiber add to the feeling of fullness.

Spread out the food and fun all day long. At the Finn family Thanksgiving gathering, they schedule dessert after a walk, while watching a movie together.

"We eat midday, and instead of another meal at dinnertime, we continue the feast with dessert a few hours after the main meal," Finn explains.

Go Easy on Alcohol

Don't forget those alcohol calories that can add up quickly.

"Have a glass of wine or a wine spritzer and between alcoholic drinks, (or) enjoy sparkling water," says Diekman. "this way you stay hydrated, limit alcohol calories, and stay sober."

Be Realistic

The holiday season is a time for celebration. With busy schedules and so many extra temptations, this is a good time to strive for weight maintenance instead of weight loss.

"Shift from a mindset of weight loss to weight maintenance," says Finn. "You will be ahead of the game if you can avoid gaining any weight over the holidays."

Focus on Family and Friends

Thanksgiving is not just about the delicious bounty of food. It's a time to celebrate relationships with family and friends.

"The main event should be family and friends socializing, spending quality time together, not just what is on the buffet," says Finn.

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Pumpkin Soup

Canned pumpkin puree, available year-round, is an easy source for the mashed cooked pumpkin. When pumpkins abound in the fall, however, you can make your own puree by roasting a small pie pumpkin and whipping the flesh in a blender or food processor.

By Mayo Clinic staff

Serves 4



Ingredients

- 3/4 cup water
- 1 small onion, chopped
- 1 can (8 ounces) pumpkin puree
- 1 cup unsalted vegetable broth
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1 cup fat-free milk
- 1/8 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 green onion, green top only, chopped

Directions

In a large saucepan, heat 1/4 cup of the water over medium heat. Add the onion and cook until tender, about 3 minutes. Don't let the onion dry out.

Add the remaining water, pumpkin, broth, cinnamon and nutmeg. Bring to a boil, reduce heat and simmer for 5 minutes. Stir in the milk and cook until hot. Don't boil.

Ladle into warmed individual bowls and garnish with black pepper and green onion tops. Serve immediately.

Nutritional Analysis

Serving size: 1 cup

Calories 72, Cholesterol 1mg, Protein 3g, Sodium 241mg, Carbohydrate 12g, Fiber 2g, Total Fat 1g, Potassium 199mg, Saturated Fat < 1g, Calcium 78mg, Monounsaturated Fat <1g