

4 Tasty Ways to Pack a Nutrient Punch into Your Holidays

From a health standpoint, the winter months are a stressful time of year. The cold and flu season shifts into high gear just as holiday parties and cookie exchanges become part of the daily foodscape. Just as our bodies begin to crave more nutrients and better overall nutrition, we begin to overload ourselves with sugar and fat. Fortunately, a few simple strategies can help you stay healthy and have more energy during this hectic season. And, you don't have to be a Grinch about good food either. By focusing on nutrient-rich foods first, you can reap the impressive benefits of smart eating habits - and still enjoy all of the little indulgences of the holidays.

Make every bite of food count.

Taste is the number one reason why we make the choice to eat one food rather than another. So, here is the key to healthy holiday eating. Stop imagining that you have to give up your favorite holiday treats, like those once-a-year cookies made by a special relative. As soon as you even imagine being deprived, you want to eat more. Instead, plan to enjoy one or two cookies rather than a whole plate. **To get the most flavor and pleasure from any food, slow down and savor every bite.**

Make over a favorite recipe.

Many of our favorite holidays recipes could be enhanced with a nutrition makeover. Fortunately, there are plenty of ways to lighten up the typical recipe without sacrificing taste or texture. The Mayo Clinic offers a basic guide to redoing recipes with your health in mind at www.mayoclinic.com/health/healthy-recipes/NU00584. For foods that you want just the way they are, reduce the portion size. Cut your usual serving in half, eat slowly, and savor every bite.

Make lean protein a priority.

Holiday meals, snacks, and treats tend to be high in sugar and fat, but low on protein - which is a serious nutrition shame. High quality protein provides satiety (the feeling of fullness), along with important health benefits (maintaining muscle mass, blood sugar, and healthy bones, etc.). **Include some lean protein every time you eat, especially at breakfast and snacks.** Protein possibilities: 8 ozs. low-fat yogurt, a string cheese stick, a handful of nuts, and 1-2 slices of lean deli meat.

Make smart snacks a daily habit.

Snacks can have two important roles in a healthy lifestyle. First, smart snacks are a key way to fill in nutrient gaps. (Many Americans aren't getting enough calcium, fiber, potassium, or vitamins A and C.) Also, a well-timed snack - before a big buffet or holiday party - helps tame your appetite so you aren't tempted to eat everything in sight. **Fruits, veggies, and lean protein always make smart snacks.** Try an apple with cheese slices or baby carrots with a stick of beef jerky.

WANT TO MAKE SOME NEW HOLIDAY DISHES THIS YEAR? It's a snap to start healthful food traditions for your family and guests. Just add a few new recipes to your usual holiday menus each year - and before you know it, everyone will be looking forward to your deliciously healthful feasts. Two popular cooking magazines (and their web sites) are excellent sources of tasty ideas: *Cooking Light* (www.cookinglight.com/) and *Eating Well* (www.eatingwell.com/).