



**CONTACT: Crystelle Fogle, MBA, RD 406-947-2344**

**MT Department of Public Health & Human Services**

December 2010

## Savoring Holiday Foods for Comfort, Joy, and Good Health

Ah December in Montana! When holiday goodies are the focus of every event from neighborhood cookie exchanges to office parties, the world can feel like an endless nutrition minefield. Then, on top of all the eating and drinking, there's plenty of unrealistic holiday health advice from all sorts of 'experts.'

"The national holiday food frenzy can be difficult to navigate," says Dayle Hayes, MS, RD (registered dietitian) and president of Nutrition for the Future in Billings. "With a diet looming on the January horizon, many Americans throw caution to the wind and gobble up everything in sight. This overindulgence often leaves us overstuffed, physically uncomfortable, and feeling guilty." Fortunately, there is another approach.

According to Hayes, you can survive the stressful eating season with your health and holiday spirit intact. The key is to slow down and take the time to really savor whatever you are eating. "As a nation, we tend to eat quickly and not pay much attention to the flavors and textures of our food," she explains. "When we eat hurriedly, we often eat more than we want with less satisfaction." In other countries, like Italy, France, China, and Argentina, mealtimes tend to be longer, with family and friends lingering at the table to talk.

To savor food means, "to taste appreciatively" or "to relish." When we appreciate and relish our food, we often eat less and enjoy it more. If you are used to chowing down and moving on, paying attention to food may take a little practice. Hayes suggests these strategies to help you savor the food at any holiday event.

- **Prevent overeating by not getting overly hungry:** It is difficult, if not impossible, to make smart food choices when you are super hungry. Deprivation naturally leads to overeating at parties or buffets filled with tempting goodies. Instead of starving before parties, eat regular meals and have a protein snack before you go out. A cup of soup, a string cheese, a piece of beef jerky, or a handful of nuts work well.
- **Eat and drink slowly while listening to internal cues of satiety (fullness):** When you eat too quickly or while doing other things, it's easy to overeat – past the point of pleasure and even past the point of physical comfort. Real satisfaction comes from eating slowly, from savoring the aromas, textures and flavors of food, and from letting your body say, "that's plenty," before you are overly stuffed.
- **Take a time-out from food to check your stress levels:** Much of our usual holiday eating and drinking has nothing to do with hunger or fullness. It's a way to cope with tense situations or difficult people. If this happens to you, move away from the food and spend some quality time with a friend – or walk around the block. Often, this is all it takes to realize that stuffing more food will make you feel worse rather than better.

"If you want to eat well this holiday, there is no need to call in the food police or hope that a Grinch steals all your Christmas cookies," says Hayes. "By practicing some basic self-care and by listening to your body, you can enjoy all your favorite holiday meals and treats with comfort – and in good health."

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