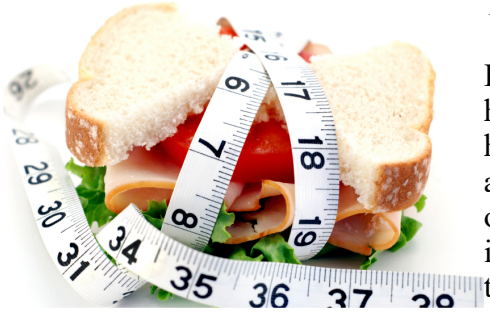
Cooking up healthy holidays

Here's a holiday recipe that might seem familiar:

- *Take one helping of family conflict*
- *Mix well with non-stop television viewing*
- *Scoop in an extra helping of fat and empty carbs*
- *Add a half-dozen screaming kids*
- *Wash it all down with a generous dose of spiked eggnog*



Tried that one before?

If so, you can take comfort in knowing there are millions of people who have shared that very same dish. It's not hard to understand why: the holiday season is one of the few times in the year to relax with friends and family. The results? We often put a tremendous amount of pressure on perfection which can cause anxiety and overindulgence. Fortunately, it doesn't have to be that way. Keep the holidays fun and your waistline trim by:

Indulging yourself (a little). Watching your food doesn't mean sitting in a corner with a rice cake and bean sprout sandwich while everyone else is filling up on turkey and stuffing. In fact, that type of attitude can be counterproductive: by depriving yourself, you become more susceptible to an eventual dessert-table binge. Follow the 80/20 rule: make smart food choices 80 per cent of the time and allow small "indulgences" 20 per cent of the time. You'll ward off the feast or famine mentality that causes people to 'let themselves go' during the holidays.

Taking time to savour. Many people get so used to holiday gluttony, that they don't even realize what they're putting into their mouth before it's too late. Instead of wolfing down half a dozen shortbreads only to feel like an overstuffed turkey twenty minutes later, take one and eat it slowly, appreciating the taste of every morsel. By paying attention to the food you're consuming, you're less likely to overeat.

Cutting out the fat. Food doesn't have to be drenched in fat to taste good. Instead of sautéing with oil, substitute with vegetable or chicken stock. Try to move away from the heavy cream and milk-laden sauces and instead consider Mediterranean style dishes that incorporate olive oil and other healthy ingredients. Look for lower fat, lower sugar options to your favourite festive deserts. Finally, as hard as it is, ease up on the salt: excess sodium not only raises your blood pressure but also encourages water retention, causing you to expand like that jolly old elf.

Snacking selectively. Snacking is a great way to keep your appetite in check and prevent overeating at dinnertime, but be picky about your snack choices. Steer clear of dips, sauces, cookies and other high fat foods. Instead, try fresh fruit, or whole-wheat crackers and bagels.

Staying active during the holidays. One of the reasons weight gain is so common during the holidays is that people focus on the eating and drinking, neglecting other parts of their lives. Also, because most people live such a hurried, activity-packed existence, when given the chance to take a break, they often go to the opposite extreme and lay immobilized on the couch with potato chips and candy.

When planning your holidays, try to incorporate activities that don't involve food or television, such as taking walks, or, playing a family sport or activity. Or consider starting a "test run" of your get-fit new year's resolution—buy a membership at a local gym, and set aside some time to exercise.

Adding shopping to your workout routine. Shopping is a great way to add exercise to your holiday schedule. Try parking your car twenty minutes away from the store or mall you plan to visit, and walk over instead of driving. Not only do you avoid the frustration of finding the elusive parking spot, but you get a workout, too!

Eating more cranberries. Cranberries are often the healthiest part of holiday dinner: they taste great, and they're full of antioxidants, which can help keep your body healthy during the holiday season. This is especially true of fresh berries, which contain far less sugar than the canned variety.

Choosing white meat over dark. Everyone's got their own preference, but if you eat turkey during the holidays, it's important to keep in mind that white meat is considerably lower in calories and fat than its dark counterpart.

Steering clear of stuffing. If there's any food that's wreaked more havoc on waistlines than stuffing, it's yet to be discovered. However, if you must indulge, do so in moderation, and choose vegetable and berry stuffings over the calorie-packing pork variety.

Saying yes to sweet potatoes. One of the healthiest, most vitamin packed foods at the holiday dinner table, providing you manage to scrape off the butter and brown sugar topping.

Watching out for the eggnog. Here's another holiday favourite that's renowned for its calorie-packing abilities. If you can't celebrate without eggnog, at least make it healthier by using soy milk, choosing lower fat versions, or diluting it with water.

Holding back on the liquor. Not only is alcohol a major source of calories, it also stimulates the appetite, making you more susceptible to the temptations of the dessert table. Consider skipping out on the drinking altogether by acting as the designated driver for your friends. If you must drink, however, at least give your internal organs a holiday break: limit yourself to 15mL of alcohol—approximately one beer—per hour, the average processing speed of a healthy liver. And after a night of over-indulgence, make sure to have a few glasses of water before you going bed.

No matter how much we try, the holidays will never be perfect. But by putting all the proper elements together, the holidays can be a happy, enjoyable experience, instead of a recipe for diet disaster.