

December is Celebrate Healthy Month

FORWARD DUPAGE is pleased to designate December as Celebrate Healthy Month but encourages you to think “celebrate healthy” throughout the year. As you sit down to plan holiday dinners, snacks and celebrations, we encourage you to consider a few healthy alternatives.

Nearly all holidays have some traditional association with food. When Valentine’s Day approaches, we expect chocolate and candy hearts. St. Patrick’s Day is often a request for green food, most likely Jell-O and frosting and green tinted treats. When we think of Easter, chocolate bunnies and candy eggs come to mind. When a birthday approaches, we plan with birthday cakes. Halloween is all about the candy and treats. Thanksgiving creates visions of side dishes and pies and inevitably uncomfortably full stomachs. Christmas is about the cookies, candies and other treats. And those are just the holidays. When we celebrate milestones, e.g., when children move up to the next level or graduate from preschool, kindergarten and high school; we celebrate with parties and treats, ice cream and pizza.

The more we, the adults, associate holiday celebrations with food, the more likely children are to grow up with the same emotional dependence on food—food for comfort, food for celebrations, food for holidays and food that has nothing to do with feeding our hunger. Adults who struggle with weight issues spend a lifetime trying to overcome this emotional dependency on food. What an opportunity to shift the dialogue and holiday expectations when children are young. Challenge family members to be creative and consider ways to change the focus of celebrations away from unhealthy foods.

Change is hard. We have warm memories and enjoy celebrating holidays with food traditions. And besides, we’ve heard time and again that any food in moderation isn’t all bad. The challenge is to find a balance. One way to hang on to tradition is to allow a few treats but add healthier options and physical activity to the plan. Explain holiday treats to young children using the Go, Slow, Whoa Foods concept (<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/educational/wecan/downloads/go-slow-whoa.pdf>). If candy, cookies and treats are offered at Christmas, offer it **in moderation** and help the children to understand that “Chocolate is a *whoa* food. We can’t have it every day. But now and then it’s OK to enjoy this kind of treat. And Christmas is the perfect time to do so.” Consider these tips:

- Begin the holiday or celebration day with a family activity. Check out your community for holiday runs, take your family for a walk around the neighborhood, dance as a family to holiday music, play holiday active games and so on.
- To balance the additional calories, add activity into your plan throughout the day. If you use tracking devices, challenge the family to set a number of steps goal or aim for a set number of active minutes. Plan for and play active games with your guests? It’s highly likely that your guests might enjoy an after dinner walk?
- Celebrate with non-food treats. Paper plates, napkins, favors and flowers help set a warm, inviting and celebratory table that has nothing to do with food.
- Begin the day with a low-calorie, protein-rich breakfast to sustain you through the day and help to prevent you from overeating when the main celebration begins. Resist the urge to save all of your calories for late in the day. You’re likely to be extremely hungry and eat more than intended.

- Offer food in moderation and think portion control--mini cupcakes, bite size cookies and portioned snacks in colorful mini muffin cups.
- Follow the My Plate® (<https://www.choosemyplate.gov/>) advice and make sure at least half your plate is filled with fruit and vegetables to help fill you up. Fill the rest of your plate with other holiday foods so you don't feel deprived.
- Mix a bit of boiled cauliflower into your mashed potatoes. Limit the number of appetizer and side dishes that are rich in sauces, cheeses and heavy cream; substituting these with healthier options.
- If you are the guest, bring a healthy dish to a pass. If you're the hostess, plan healthy options for your guests. See Pinterest for creative holiday healthy options. Weight Watchers® on line also has a variety of appealing and tasty lower-calorie recipes.
- Fruit by itself makes an excellent dessert. Place berries or cut up fruit in colorful paper muffin cups or in crystal/or plastic stemmed glasses. Place an attractive bowl with grapes, apples or clementines on the table. Dip fruit in chocolate for a bit of sweet and healthy combined. Serve berries in small dark-chocolate cups with a dusting of powdered sugar.
- Serve vegetables with a low fat dip (think Greek yogurt instead of sour cream or mayonnaise, hummus or other bean dips, low fat or fat free mayo is easily disguised when you add spices, herbs and flavoring). Keep the calories low.
- Serve water with fruit or cucumber slices, low fat milk, seltzer or seltzer in punch to lighten the sugar, etc. Served colored milk (green, orange, pink) for a festive touch.
- Serve fruit, vegetables, cheese, nuts, and special crackers.

And finally, introduce cooking projects to make any snack or treat more appealing. When children help prepare foods, they are more excited about trying and tasting new foods. With this kind of excitement, they won't even miss the candy, cake, cookies and treats. Pinterest has a number of creative ideas at <https://www.pinterest.com/> or try these links:

<https://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2016/11/healthy-holiday-foods-fun>
<https://www.stemilt.com/stem-blog/eating-healthy-during-holidays/>
<https://www.seventhgeneration.com/blog/10-tips-eating-healthy-during-holidays>
<https://blogs.chihealth.com/celebrate-healthy-habits-this-holiday-season/>
<https://www.everydayhealth.com/healthy-holidays-pictures/healthy-holiday-traditions-to-try>
<https://d3knp61p33sjvn.cloudfront.net/2017/12/DGTipsheet32MakeHealthierHolidayChoices.pdf>
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