

# Don't Be Fooled by Holiday Food Halos

By Christine N. Levy, RD/LD, Dietitian, Evans Army Community Hospital



Healthy eating doesn't just happen. You have to plan for it, just like you plan for anything else that you want to achieve. Growing up I frequently heard, "fail to plan, then plan to fail!" and that is usually what would happen. This definitely happens when I don't plan for healthy snacks or meals, regardless of the day. No matter what time of year, people are setting goals to eat healthy, be active and or lose weight, but for some reason, the 62 days between Halloween and New Year's Day can throw our lives upside down....all due to the food that we encounter during the holidays.

Why must a holiday always be associated with a food? Why do we feel the need to eat or drink something every time we get together with friends? Why do we feel like we have to eat "every" favorite food that we ever had as a child, when we go "home for the holidays"? Why do we feel like we have to eat everything until all we see is the empty plate, and why are our plates like platters? Why? Why? Why? It's JUST food.

We need to eat to live, not live to eat. Food provides energy and yes we should enjoy our food, but not at the risk of damaging our health. Thinking about what you're going to eat or bring to a party or how you're going to distract yourself from overeating, are just a few strategies to help you prevent gaining unnecessary weight during the holiday season. I've included a few tips here to help you navigate through the high caloric waves that you will come in contact with during the holidays.

1. Don't put a food Halo over the Holiday with a statement like, "but it only happens once a year", or "how much could one day hurt?" Well that one day could set your diet back weeks as you attempt to eat less and exercise more after that meal as you try to burn off the extra food or alcohol that you consumed.
2. Be Proactive for Every Party and Meal – find out the menu so that you can plan in advance what and how much you may eat, as well as offering to bring a healthy salad, vegetable or side dish that you know you can eat. Or if possible, eat before you go so that you don't even feel the need to eat anything; especially if it is at a mid-meal time of day. And it's ok to decide to NOT eat something and then have a healthier option when you get home.
3. Start looking now for Healthy Alternatives to the Traditional High Fat, Sugar and Calorie foods. Increase the number of vegetables that you make and decrease the number of starch-type foods. Plan to make a seasonal healthy salad and offer the salad first. Serve flavored mineral water instead of champagne. If your event is going to last a few days, i.e Thanksgiving weekend, then offer a different dessert or starch each day versus offering three desserts and starches at one meal. People will feel less likely to overeat and will truly enjoy those specific items rather than stuffing themselves for fear they won't see that food again.
4. Don't Skip Meals to "Save" Up for Later – you'll always eat more calories "Later" and won't be able to control urges because you'll justify that you're making up for a missed meal.

5. Plan Your Holiday Activity. You should move every day of the weekend and if you're off work for the holiday, you may actually have time to exercise twice. There is no rule against walking in the morning and then again in the afternoon or evening, or going ice skating, hiking or even Black Friday shopping could count for activity, as long as you don't spend it in the Food Court!
6. Keep a Food and Activity Log. Start now so that as you hit the high point of the season, you'll have days of healthy eating and activity to motivate to keep it up! Though it sounds easy to say you'll "burn" it off, it can take hours if not days of activity, to burn off a decadent dessert. Keep in mind that your taste buds are typically satisfied after two bites, and that after a few weeks of not eating certain foods, you actually can lose your taste for them altogether.
7. Focus on What You Can Have. Portion control will dictate the amount of food that you can have, but plan for two servings of fruits/vegetables at every meal, a large salad at lunch, dinner, and or snack, whole grains, grilled meat or fish, and low fat dairy options. Limit your condiments and sauces and always serve them on the side.
8. Drink Enough Water. Drink a glass before each meal and certainly before you have any caloric drink or alcohol and certainly if you are going to have more than one glass of alcohol, drink or beer, then drink a glass of water in between.
9. Know What a Serving Size Looks Like. It's a little awkward to carry your measuring cups and scale with you to a party, so measure foods at home so that you know what  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of mashed potatoes looks like, or a  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of cranberry sauce. This is where it gets tricky if the plates are huge. If that happens then fill  $\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{3}{4}$ <sup>th</sup> of your plate with vegetables and salad, and then serve yourself the other menu items.
10. Enjoy Your Meal, but More Importantly Enjoy the Company. We do tend to think of food when think about a holiday, so if you focus more on the memories and traditions you're creating, the food takes a back seat and just complements the holiday, it doesn't become THE holiday. Every day is a holiday so eat healthy, be active, practice moderation and smile. You and everyone around you will benefit more from that than from an artery clogging plate of food.