

Script – Print – Get a Grip on Holiday Eating

Moderation is Key during the Next Few Weeks

It's that time of the year when we start to have visions of food and lots of it dancing in our heads. Our calendar over the next few weeks will be crammed with holiday parties, family get-togethers, not to mention lots of time spent in the kitchen preparing mouth-watering dishes, exotic appetizers and decadent desserts.

The thoughts of being surrounded by all these amazing food choices can be downright overwhelming. So how can we navigate our way through the holidays without overindulging? How can we enjoy the spirit of the season without paying for it later?

Nicole O'Neill is a clinical dietitian for OSF HealthCare. She says this time of the year is difficult because unlike your birthday, which is a one-day event, the holiday season tends to be a series of events that can last for days and weeks, and really opens the door for people to pack on the pounds. But that doesn't mean you can't enjoy yourself.

"I would never tell anyone you can't have something," says O'Neill. "If your mom makes the best cheesecake ever, have a piece and enjoy it. First of all, it's going to hurt her feelings if you don't and how long can you go without something before you throw your hands in the air and say 'give it all to me' and then you overindulge? So being purposeful, having the focus on the good healthy things but then allow yourself the grace to enjoy something."

For starters, O'Neill encourages people to eat something at home before attending any type of event. Going to a gathering on an empty stomach could lead to overeating. When you arrive, avoid mindless picking at the appetizers. Those pigs in a blanket, cheese and crackers and cookies all add up in a hurry. Instead, O'Neill recommends using a small plate and start with healthy fare. Look for the carrots and broccoli first, for example, before grabbing for the cocktail meatballs or bacon wrapped dates. And don't forget – you still have the main course and possibly dessert yet to go.

"Most party hosts put the good, healthy fruits and veggies at the end of the buffet line because no one really wants those," says O'Neill. "If you can, start the buffet line backwards. Get the fruits and vegetables and even shrimp cocktail – that's not a horrible calorie load, it has a little protein and will stick with you for a little while – then you're not overindulging in the fatty, greasy, heavy glorious things that call our names."

Another important tip is to get in a little exercise during the holidays. It doesn't necessarily mean a trip to the gym or signing up for a 5K. Keep it simple. It might be cleaning your house or dancing in the living room. Exercise helps with digestion, relieves holiday stress and can improve mental health as well.

"But the holiday when you're with all your families and friends and you're enjoying each other's company does it always have to be around food? That's another thing to think about," says O'Neill. "Could you go for a walk with your people? Could you go for a bike ride?"

Finally, if you're currently on some type of diet plan, O'Neill says to just plan on maintaining your weight over the next few weeks. The goal should be to not gain weight, rather than worrying about losing weight. Maintain your good habits, get plenty of fluids and rest, and pay extra attention to portion sizes. The holidays are a time to celebrate, not a time to be miserable and stressed out.

"Eating during the holiday season shouldn't be a cause for panic," says O'Neill. "Have it, enjoy it, just smaller portions. Just be reasonable. You know when you're being naughty. Food is not naughty, of course, anything is allowable. If you eat six cookies you probably know that's not in your best interest. Pay attention to your serving sizes – they should be smaller than your fist. A couple cookies aren't going to hurt you. You just don't want to overdo it."

For more information on healthy eating, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).