

Eat deliberately this holiday season

November, December and January bring bountiful holiday meals.

While it's tempting to chow down, experts are cautioning about how overindulgence can make you feel mentally and physically crummy in the moment, plus open the door to long-term unhealthy eating habits.

Have the right mindset

Andrew Zasada, MD, provides emergency department care at OSF HealthCare. He says avoiding stuffing yourself starts before you sit down for the meal.

"If you come to the meal hungry, you tend to try to make up for not having breakfast. You load your plate up, which is going to cause you to overeat," Dr. Zasada says. "Instead, have a light snack an hour or two before you sit down to the meal.

"Put the food in one room and sit down in another room to eat. That necessitates you going there rather than having food available for another fill."

The meal itself

Enjoy holiday meals, Dr. Zasada says. It's not a race.

Grab a smaller plate, and take smaller portions of each item. Pretend you're filling the plate up for a child. You wouldn't take five rolls and two big slabs of meat for a youngster, so don't do it for your adult self.

Other tips: Chew slowly. Between bites, put your utensil down, take a drink of water and talk to someone. This allows your stomach to fill up and tell your brain that you're full.

When you finish eating, leave the table, and go to another room. Staying next to the food increases the temptation to keep nibbling.

If you can't help it

Dr. Zasada says despite our best efforts, sometimes you overeat during holiday meals. Maybe you don't want to offend your aunt by not having a slice of her famous pie.

If that happens, Dr. Zasada says there are two pitfalls to avoid: Drinking alcohol and lying down right after the meal.

"That opens up the sphincters of your stomach, slows down digestion and increases the chance for heartburn," Dr. Zasada says.

Try tea or coffee after a meal instead of alcohol. But if you must indulge in a spirit, Dr. Zasada says to wait at least 90 minutes so your stomach can partially empty.

Instead of lying down for that post-meal nap, sit upright, talk to people or play a game. If the weather is nice, go for a walk.

A word on more serious eating issues

Holiday meals may be difficult for people who suffer from [eating disorders](#), such as binge eating (eating a lot in one sitting and feeling you can't stop), anorexia nervosa (an unwarranted fear of being overweight which leads to things like starvation) or bulimia nervosa (taking unhealthy steps to avoid weight gain like purging your food).

Dr. Zasada says, in the moment, you should have someone you trust who can help you through the holiday meal and check in with you later. Long term, he says these are serious issues that should be talked about with a health care provider.

"Repeated bulimia will damage your teeth. It's corrosive. You lose electrolytes when you vomit," Dr. Zasada says. "You become sick. If you do this repeatedly, you will lose weight in an unhealthy way. You will possibly dehydrate. You will start losing muscle mass.

"It's just not a good thing."

Bottom line: Don't get discouraged

Dr. Zasada says one day of extra eating may make you feel bad, but it isn't going to derail your overall health.

"One day won't make you fat," he says.

Get back into your healthy eating habits the next day while enjoying those leftovers in moderation. If you feel you are struggling to maintain a healthy weight or body image, talk to your primary care provider. They may refer you to a specialist like a dietitian or mental health provider. From there, plans could include a diet and exercise regimen, medication or, in rare cases, weight loss surgery.