

Weighing in on the holidays : Santa Barbara County dietitians offer 10 tips to keep off the pounds

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You're surrounded. To the left are the sugar cookies, to the right the peppermint bark, behind you a mountain of fudge and straight ahead, gulp, endless pumpkin pies. Egads, the holiday season begins Thursday, and from here on, every special dinner and party can pile on the pounds.

Fear not, say five registered dietitians practicing in Santa Barbara.

They offer 10 tips to avoid gaining weight during the most delicious time of the year.

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1. Prioritize.

Look at the treats at a party, but walk away before you sample anything, advised Francie White, co-director of the Central Coast Intensive Outpatient Eating Disorder Program at Family Therapy Institute. "Then decide what really sounds good. Get a reasonable portion and enjoy it thoroughly."

2. Don't make high-calorie party treats your dinner

"Don't abandon your good dietary habits," said Dr. Kristi Wrightson, who has a doctorate in naturopathic medicine and works at Integrative Medicine Center. "You wouldn't normally eat a plate of cheese and crackers for dinner. During the holidays, it's not a good idea to do that."

3. Eat small frequent meals

Do this especially before parties featuring tempting sweets, said Betsy Markle, who owns and operates Sunshine Wellness Institute in Santa Barbara. She explained this curbs hunger and makes blood sugar stable, which leaves you feeling content, focused and energetic. And "you're burning calories more rapidly." She added that this eating pattern helps hormone levels, which benefits metabolism.

She said a good dinner could be, say, chicken (protein) with rice or a vegetable (carbohydrates). For a salad, add chicken, nuts or shrimp for protein; beans and fruit for the carbs.

She recommended having 20 to 25 grams of carbs and 1 to 3 ounces of proteins in each meal. The result, she said, is you're not starving and you feel satisfied.

4. Watch portion sizes

"Be conscious of what you eat and how much you eat," said Caro Stinson, director of nutrition services at the Santa Barbara County Public Health Department. "Large portions have large calories, especially of high-calorie, high-fat holiday foods."

"If you want large portions, get something from the veggie platter — without the dip."

5. Bring healthy food with you

Mrs. Markle suggests taking a nutritious appetizer or entree to holiday parties or meals for yourself and others to enjoy. She recommends a skewer of marinated cherry bocconcini or ovolini cheese with cherry tomatoes and basil. Bocconcini is a kind of mozzarella cheese, which Mrs. Markle noted is lower in calories than other cheeses. (See recipe.)

"As much as people like to eat bad stuff, they'll appreciate something healthy," she said.

6. Exercise

Maintain or increase your normal workout schedule, Dr. Wrightson said. " 'Just because it's the holidays' is not a good excuse to stop exercising."

In fact, as people take time off from work during the holidays, they have more time to exercise, Dr. Wrightson noted. "We're not going to go for weight loss, but I like people to maintain their weight over the holidays."

7. Speak up

If people bring sweets to work, ask them not to put them in view of your desk, Mrs. White said. "Get the food away from one's working environment. If an alcoholic had a bar sitting next to his desk with opened bottles, that would be rude. I'd like people to be assertive and ask that food be put somewhere not within easy sight. We have an evolutionary response to food we see."

8. Get enough sleep

People are hungrier and eat more if they didn't rest well during the previous night, Ms. French said. A lack of quality sleep can increase insulin resistance, and that can cause hunger, Ms. French explained. "It's important to make yourself go to bed."

9. Watch what you drink

Sodas and alcoholic beverages "can have a lot of empty calories," Mrs. Stinson said. After you have a drink, she said, switch to water.

Dr. Wrightson noted alcohol actually increases the appetite for food: The more you drink, the more you eat.

"Even caffeine can do it," said Gerri French of Sansum Clinic. She said drinking coffee and other caffeinated beverages can increase your appetite a few hours later

10. Slow down

"There's research to support you'll eat less if you eat slower," Ms. French said. "... Your brain will register earlier on that your stomach is full."

Betsy Markle, registered dietitian at Sunshine Wellness, recommends bringing this appetizer to holiday parties to help keep you — and others — on track.

BOCCONCINI TOMATO SKEWERS

20 cherry bocconcini or ovolini cheese, or 5 regular bocconcini sliced into quarters

2 tablespoons olive oil

2 tablespoons fresh parsley, chopped

1 tablespoon fresh chives, chopped

1/4 teaspoon salt

1/4 teaspoon black pepper

20 cherry tomatoes

40 small fresh basil leaves

Put bocconcini in bowl with oil, parsley, chives, salt and black pepper. Mix. Cover and refrigerate for at least 1 hour.

Cut each cherry tomato in half and thread one half on skewer or toothpick, followed by basil leaf, bocconcini, another leaf and another tomato half. Repeat with remaining skewers and ingredients and serve.

Yield: 20 servings

Source: Betsy Markle, registered dietitian at Sunshine Wellness in Santa Barbara