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December 2009 Issue
Naughty and Nice — A 'Give-and-Take' Approach to Holiday Feasting
 By Lindsey Getz
Today's Dietitian
 Vol. 11 No. 12 P. 24



Arm your clients with some of these holiday eating tips and you'll help them stick to their diet while still enjoying their favorite treats of the season.

The holidays can be the most difficult time of the year for clients who are trying to maintain a healthy regimen. After all, food is part of almost every holiday celebration—and there tends to be a lot of it. "Food is always available at this time of year," says Amanda Kaster, RD, president of Compassionate Eating, LLC. "There are after-work get-togethers, family events, office parties, and more. And all of these events have food."

Many people have honored traditions in which food is an integral part of the celebration. For them, the idea of having to forgo these foods can be disappointing. It can be overwhelming for clients who are trying their best to stay on track, but there are plenty of helpful tips you can offer to make their efforts easier.

"We don't want to put a damper on the holiday spirit and completely discourage people," says Gloria Tsang, RD, founder of HealthCastle.com, an online nutrition community. "But it's important to have a strategy. Whether you're the one cooking or you're going to a party, you should have a plan that will make it easier to eat healthy."

Party Planning
 The first thing you should stress to clients is to never go to a party feeling hungry. "If you're really hungry, you can get irrational and completely overeat," says Tsang. "Go to a party with a reasonable appetite but not starving."

This advice goes against the party-going strategy that many of your clients may already use: not eating all day so they can pig out at the event. "I urge people not to skip all of their meals just to save up the calories," says Sara Shama, RD, wellness advisor at Kingley Health. "It's better to still have a balanced breakfast and lunch that day. Maybe you can shrink the portion sizes of breakfast or lunch a little, but you should not arrive at the party starving. If you do, you risk being so hungry that you have no sense of control over how much you eat."

Upon arriving at the party, your clients should avoid sitting near the buffet table or at a table where food is already set out. These locations can lead to mindless eating, warns Shama. "If the food is in front of you all night, it's easy to graze and pick at things without putting thought into how much you're actually consuming," she says. Also, encourage clients to use a plate so they know exactly how much they're eating. For example, advise them to scoop a small amount of dip and a handful of chips onto their plate rather than standing over the main bowl. This strategy goes for other appetizers as well. When picking up finger foods, which are usually packed with the most fat and calories, it's easy for people to lose track of how many they've eaten.

"In general, appetizers are the worst food item for you at a party," says Tsang. "And it's easy to fill up on appetizers before the main course is even served. Have a game plan. If there's something you really love to eat, save room for it. Don't use up all your calories on the appetizers."

Of course, watching portion size is also an obvious but important recommendation. Your clients don't have to hang out by the veggie tray all night; instead, they can enjoy some of their favorite foods if they keep portion control in mind.

"I always push moderation with my clients," says Kaster. "Some people may get to the point where not allowing themselves to enjoy a food they love or crave will lead to unhealthy eating behaviors. For instance, instead of just allowing yourself to have that one slice of pie, by restricting it all season, perhaps you ultimately end up eating the whole pie. I tell my clients to go into the holidays with the mindset that they can enjoy this time of year. If they know their favorite dessert will be part of a holiday celebration, then they should plan on having a small slice without letting the guilt set in. It's that guilt that can often lead to unhealthy eating behaviors."

Another way your clients may rapidly stack the number of calories they've consumed at a party is by sipping them. Popular holiday cocktails and drinks such as eggnog are often packed with sugar. And drinking calories is certainly an easy way to lose track of just how many you've had.

"I advise my clients that in between every alcoholic or sugary beverage to drink a glass of water," says Shama. "It's an easy way to cut down on the amount of extra calories you might be drinking, and it also gives you a break from the constant alcohol consumption." An added bonus? Water will help fill you up and leave less room for squeezing in any extra—and unnecessary—food calories throughout the night.

Strategies for the Chef
 If your client is the one preparing the holiday meals, he or she will have an easier time controlling the amount of fat and number of calories being served. However, that's not to say that the cook has to serve only tofu turkey and vegetables—an easy way to prevent guests from wanting to make a return holiday visit! Holiday favorites that everyone enjoys can still be part of the meal. But instead of having all unhealthy sides, serve a variety. "Maybe you'll have one traditional side and one that's lower in fat and calories," says Tsang. "You can fill up on the healthier options but still have smaller portion sizes of the traditional favorites."

Another option is to make favorite holiday dishes using healthy ingredient substitutions. "It's really easy to modify a lot of existing recipes to cut the amount of calories and fat back," says Shama. "For instance, substituting applesauce in place of oil cuts out the fat calories and makes it a healthier dish. Or even just using a light butter instead of regular butter makes the dish more heart healthy."

Refer to the accompanying chart for other helpful substitutions, but keep in mind that some clients may feel discouraged by the idea of making changes to traditional holiday dishes they enjoy. Though many will appreciate advice on preparing healthier varieties of their favorite foods, some clients truly prefer the original. If it's a holiday food they're eating only once a year, let them know it's OK to indulge a little. "You don't want to get to the point where you've substituted an item to death that they can't even enjoy it anymore," says Kaster. "If you don't like the non[fat] or low-fat version, then it's silly to force it and feel unsatisfied. This is where moderation is important. Allow yourself the original; just watch the portion size."

Drinks also have healthier varieties that some clients may appreciate. Traditional eggnog is usually made with egg yolk and heavy cream, says Tsang. "But if you Google 'low-fat eggnog,' you will find lots of healthier recipes," she adds. "And if you buy commercial eggnog, you will be delighted to find low-fat or fat-free versions out there. We've even seen soy eggnog!"

Tsang also suggests that instead of opting for beer, sugary cocktails, or drinks with heavy cream liquors such as Bailey's Irish Cream or Kahlua, try wine or spirits mixed with diet soda or tonic water. This will help keep the calories in check. "Remember that calories from alcohol tend to be stored in the abdomen," she says. "And people who are overweight actually gain weight more easily when they consume alcohol."

When it comes to baking and dessert, you can also shrink the portion sizes of each serving, even if you're not changing the ingredients, suggests Shama. Cut smaller slices of pies and cakes before serving or bake cookies with small portion sizes in mind. "If the recipe says it makes three-dozen cookies, extend it to six dozen by cutting the size of each cookie in half," adds Shama.

Boost Self-Esteem
 While most people get a little worried or distressed over eating too much during the holidays, this is a time of year when RDs should pay close attention to potential signs of disordered eating among their clients. Kaster, who specializes in eating disorders, says that for some, dangerous eating patterns can emerge around the holidays. And that behavior may continue.

"I deal with a lot of 'binge-and-restrict' behavior during this time," she says. "Someone may restrict themselves all day or even all week and then binge at a party. There are a lot of women who have a disordered eating pattern year-round but can keep it in check most of the time. During the holiday season, however, those patterns might emerge full force, and some people can become quite abusive to themselves. It's something to watch for."

Kaster adds that feeling uncomfortably full after a large meal is a time when people may feel the worst about themselves and can become the most mentally abusive or even depressed about their eating habits. She encourages clients to go for a stroll after meals, which aids in the digestion process. If clients do accidentally overeat, Kaster recommends that they try eating a piece of dried papaya, which contains enzymes that aid in digesting proteins, fats, and starches. "It helps get rid of that full feeling that can make you feel so awful about yourself," she says.

In addition, Kaster encourages her clients not to wait until the New Year to start an exercise program. Starting early or sticking with an existing program will help keep the calories off and even boost self-esteem. "I tell them to start now," she says. "There are a lot of benefits. Exercise can even help alleviate the stress of the holidays."

Shama adds that she sympathizes with clients who say they're too busy to exercise during the holidays but helps them come up with ways they can fit it in. She says just doing some extra walking can make a difference. "I suggest my clients wear a pedometer," she says. "They should wear it on a normal day to see how many steps they take on average. Then I tell them to aim for adding 10,000 or more steps to that number. If you normally walk 3,000 steps a day, aim for walking 13,000."

For some, adding extra walking to the day may come easily during the holidays, with all of the shopping and errands that accompany this time of year. Clients could also consider getting up a little earlier to take a morning stroll, walking in lieu of television time, or making an effort to take extra steps by using the stairs instead of an elevator or deliberately parking far away from an entrance. There are many ways to squeeze in a little bit of exercise.

Definitely Doable
 While the task of sticking to a healthy regimen during the holiday season may seem like an overwhelming task to your clients, with some of these suggestions, they may find it just a little bit easier to succeed. Sometimes that extra push or those words of encouragement are all your clients need to make some healthy changes for the holidays.

— Lindsey Getz is a freelance writer based in Royersford, Pa.

Cooking Substitutions
 Provide your clients with this handy chart to let them know they can still make some of their favorite holiday dishes but with less fat and calories.

Instead of	Use
Whole milk	1% or skim milk
Heavy cream	Nonfat half & half or 2/3 cup skim milk plus 1/3 cup vegetable oil, blended
Cream cheese	Light cream cheese, low-fat cottage cheese (purée until smooth), or Greek yogurt
Cheddar cheese	Half the amount called for using extra sharp cheddar. Add 1/4 tsp dry mustard for flavor.
American, cheddar, Colby, Monterey Jack, or Swiss cheese	Reduced-fat versions
Mozzarella cheese	Part-skim version
Whipped cream	Evaporated skim milk, chilled until almost frozen and then whipped
1/2 cup oil (for baking)	1/2 cup applesauce or 1/4 cup applesauce plus 1/4 cup buttermilk
1/2 cup shortening	1/3 cup oil or 1/4 cup "lighter bake" (available in baking aisle)
Mayonnaise	Fat-free version (add lemon juice for flavor) or plain nonfat yogurt
Bacon	Turkey bacon
1 whole egg	2 egg whites
1 cup chocolate chips	2/3 cup chocolate chips
Fudge sauce	Chocolate syrup
Nuts	Reduce amount by 1/3 or 1/2
Canned condensed cream soups	99% fat-free versions

— Chart courtesy of Kingley Health

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