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Last updated at 8:44 AM on 19/11/07

Plan of attack

A pre-emptive strike in the battle of the bulge could help you stay ahead of Christmas weight-gain



JENNY LEE
CanWest News Service

Janice McAuley, 42, has worked hard to lose weight all year - she's down 77 pounds and counting - but December has her worried.

Not only will the Vancouver facilities manager attend many treat-laden Christmas parties, it's her job to plan them too, and she's already up to her eyeballs in menu planning.

It's a dieter's nightmare, she says.

"The seafood station, baron of beef, fresh pasta, samosas, spring rolls, desserts, the late night buffet - they feed us all night. The menu is two pages long!"

Can't she just order veggie plates for everyone?

"I couldn't even imagine the mutiny," she says, laughing. "That's one of those nights I'm absolutely worried sick about."

For many of us, December might as well be a synonym for weight gain. Time is short, stress is high, time for fitness plummets and partying is intense.

But why wait for the bleak, dark days of January to roll guiltily toward the gym? We spoke to a dietitian and some fitness and weight-loss experts to learn how to combat the Christmas bulge before it even gets going.

1. Don't starve yourself before a party.

"That usually backfires," says Sandy Ennis, Weight Watchers B.C. member services manager. "It's just too hard to have self-control when you're hungry."

As well, skipping a meal makes the body think it's in starvation mode, says registered dietitian Gloria Tsang, Dietitians of Canada representative. When the next meal comes along, you will tend to eat more.

Instead, have a pre-party snack so you won't arrive starving and head straight for the appetizers. Ennis suggests a light but healthy breakfast such as multi-grain toast and a poached egg, vegetable soup, fruit and low-fat yogurt for lunch, and a pre-party snack of veggie sticks, banana or a hard-cooked egg.

2. Pick the best.

"Pick your favourite indulgences," Ennis says.

"If your favourite is shortbread cookies and you think they'll be at every party, which party are you going to have them at?"

It only takes 500 extra calories every day for a week to gain a pound. There are 500 calories in a couple of Nanaimo bars or three or four shortbread cookies.

3. Make a plan.

Are you looking to maintain your weight or perhaps to maintain your exercise routine over the holidays?

Write down a step-by-step plan for how you will make it through the holidays, Ennis suggests. What's happening for the week? Which days will you indulge and which days not?"

4. Tune up your family traditions.

Get some physical activity into the mix. Make it fun and keep it simple, says Bev Siver, ProMOTION Plus executive director.

Bundle everyone up and check out the best Christmas lights in your neighbourhood, suggests Jeff Doyle, B.C. Recreation and Parks Association fitness program manager. How about a game of Twister or charades after dinner? One person in the family needs to be the leader, Siver says. Will that be you?

5. Go for momentum.

Exercise just gets easier and easier with momentum. Start the ball rolling now and not only will you see substantial results by Christmas, you'll be way ahead of the curve in January, Doyle says.

If you're not into a structured exercise routine, simply try to get your heart rate up. Aim to be active 30 minutes a day, at least five days a week.

6. Weigh your choices.

Two Nanaimo bars have about the same calories as a baked chicken breast and baked potato with light sour cream and chives, Ennis says. A handful of nuts equals a large glass of wine. What's more important to you?

7. Change your cardio routine.

If you always do the stationary bike, try a shorter session on the elliptical trainer or treadmill.

Or simply increase your intensity on the bike. The change will challenge your body and offset a shorter session, Doyle says.

Break it up. Three 10-minute sessions are just as effective as one 30-minute one, and may be easier to fit into a busy schedule.

8. No yo-yoing.

Don't try to lose weight now in anticipation of gaining over Christmas. Your body will think it's yo-yo dieting which over time, can decrease immunity, increase blood pressure, and increase your chances of regaining weight fast, Tsang says.

An intense bout of exercise now will make you feel better, fitter and more energetic, but it won't speed your metabolism, she says.

9. Pick your booze.

The higher the proof, the higher the calories. Alcohol doesn't make you feel full, so it's easy to drink 300 to 500 calories without blinking, Tsang warns.

10. Skip rest breaks in the gym.

You can probably cut one-third of your gym time by being efficient. Stack those reps back to back. Just work opposing muscle groups such as chest, then back, then chest again, Doyle says.

11. Save 100 calories here and 50 calories there.

It really makes a difference, says Tsang. Skip the turkey skin and you'll save 100 calories. Dip into gravy rather than drowning your plate can save 80 calories. At 2,000 to 3,000 calories, a traditional Christmas meal equals an entire day's worth of food.

12. Forget perfection.

Blowing your plan is OK. Just pick up and keep going.

"Some people want to start off really hard, but keep in mind you need to ease your body into it just like easing into a hot tub," Doyle says. "Before you know it, you're in."

19/11/07

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