

Even slight holiday weight gain can set stage for obesity, health risks

December 12 2006

Although some Americans gain five to seven pounds with a diet of big meals and sweets between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day, most people only gain a pound or two during the holidays, according to a UT Southwestern Medical Center registered dietitian.

But even a slight weight gain, if left intact, can accumulate yearly and endanger health.

"The problem is in gaining a pound or two and not working it off, even with good intentions and New Year's resolutions. The gain stays on and adds up each year; in a decade it's 10 or 20 pounds," said Lona Sandon, assistant professor of clinical nutrition. "That can lead to obesity and related health problems such as hypertension, stroke, diabetes and other maladies."

So how can people avoid adding holiday weight?

Healthy food choices, eating habits, food preparation and exercise, Ms. Sandon said.

"First, focus on choosing healthy foods instead of concentrating on what you shouldn't have," she said. "For instance, seek out cranberries, which have a high level of antioxidants, which protect cells and help the body block urinary-tract infections and prevent plaque formation on teeth."

Ms. Sandon listed several other healthy or calorie-saving food choices:

- Fresh game, such as venison or wild turkey, is usually leaner than store-bought meat.
- Salad with leafy greens and colorful vegetables is a high-fiber, low-calorie choice.
- Nuts are regarded as "heart-healthy." Research suggests walnuts have cardiovascular benefits; pecans, peanuts and other nuts have "good" fats.
- Sweet potatoes contain Vitamin A – essential to a strong immune system.
- A glass of red wine, which has been found to have a positive effect on cholesterol levels and blood pressure, is less caloric than a glass of eggnog.

The key is moderation, Ms. Sandon said. Eating large portions of even healthy foods can prompt weight gain. Even an extra 150 calories per day – the amount in a 12-ounce soda or a chocolate chip cookie – can add up to a pound of extra weight in about three weeks.

Ms. Sandon offers further tips to help keep pounds from piling up:

- Avoid fast food. and set consistent meal times.
- Don't starve all day before a big feast, and you'll be less likely to overeat.
- Eat slowly, and wait a few minutes after one serving to see if you are full.
- Socialize away from the buffet table, removing a temptation to overeat.
- Bring a low-calorie dish to family feasts.

Food preparation tips

Food preparation can go a long way toward keeping holiday weight off, not to mention preventing food poisoning, Ms. Sandon said.

Here are some calorie-cutting cooking tips:

- Use broth to sauté instead of butter – 104 calories saved per tablespoon.
- Use nonfat milk instead of whole milk – 60 calories saved per cup.
- Use plain, nonfat yogurt instead of cream – 720 calories saved per cup.

Once food is ready, don't leave it out on the buffet tables for more than two hours. Doing so allows bacteria to build and spurs food-borne illnesses, leading to nausea or worse, Ms. Sandon said.

Also, keep your hands, work surfaces and cooking utensils clean.

Exercising

Exercising regularly is also important for good health, Ms. Sandon said. At least 30 minutes of vigorous physical activity each day is a good rule of thumb, but here are some other tips:

- Organize a touch football game during halftime of televised football games.
- Arrange holiday-related activities, such as ice-skating or skiing.
- Take a walk to see holiday displays.
- Walk an extra lap around the mall, even if you've finished shopping.

Source: UT Southwestern Medical Center

Citation: Even slight holiday weight gain can set stage for obesity, health risks (2006, December 12) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2006-12-slight-holiday-weight-gain-stage.html>

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