

# Tips to survive the holiday season without packing on the pounds

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Special family meals, holiday buffets and free drinks can be open invitations for disaster for the more than 50 percent of Americans who are struggling with their weight and dieting.

Navigating the holidays can be stressful, said Jeffrey Gersten, PsyD, Gottlieb Memorial Hospital. "Close family situations, the ready availability of trigger foods, such as cookies, kugels and candies, unhappy memories of past holidays – all add stress to make keeping your waistline in check a challenge."

Dr. Gersten counsels weight-conscious patients at Gottlieb Memorial Hospital, where dozens have successfully lost, and are keeping off, as much as 100 pounds or more.

Frosted cookies are an important part of enjoying the holidays for Suzy Krueckeberg, 49, who lives in a Chicago suburb. "I eat my favorite foods but change the portion size," said the graduate of a weight-loss program at Gottlieb.

"At a party, I will scope out the offerings and make my choices. I'll eat half of a frosted cookie and one-third of a dessert slice – enough so that I have a true taste of the foods I like."

Krueckeberg dropped more than 24 pounds in 12 weeks with Gottlieb's help and has lost more than 30 pounds total, despite the challenges of the holiday season. "I still go to out to dinners and restaurants, but I'll

modify the meal so that I eat an open-face sandwich, or if I really want potato chips I'll eat half and throw the other half away. I am aware of the calories and also of what I really want to eat," she said. "I do eat more salads and vegetables, but if I want to eat something, I pay attention to those feelings and I eat it, but in a smaller quantity."

Here are Dr. Gersten's top five tips to keep you from going overboard:

**The Roadmap.** You need more than just directions to the party, you need a plan for the entire occasion. "You don't plan to fail, you just fail to plan" is an old chestnut worth picking up this season. "Identify your trigger foods – those that you know you will be unable to eat in a moderate portion" and avoid them. Completely. "I know that one of my trigger foods is pizza," said Dr. Gersten, who as a young man struggled with his weight. "I know that I cannot stop after just one slice, so I stay away from it altogether and remove myself from the challenge." Provide yourself healthy options, such as bringing your own low-fat snacks to get-togethers. "Don't starve yourself either," Dr. Gersten said. "Your [blood sugar level](#) will drop, creating a hunger that is unstoppable, which will lead to overeating, usually of high-calorie foods." Stick to eating three balanced meals.

**The Telltale Crumbs.** So you polished off the entire carton of French onion dip and the bag of chips, or gobbled the plate of cookies you received as a gift. Take control of the situation immediately. "Don't tell yourself that because you've overindulged, all bets are off and everything is now fair game," Dr. Gersten said. "Every moment is a chance to begin again. Don't wait for New Year's to make resolutions. Make them now – keep them."

**Give Yourself a Timeout.** A walk in the neighborhood to enjoy the decorations, playing a favorite seasonal CD or even just taking a deep breath are all ways to relax and shake off stress. "When you are calm,

you are in control," Dr. Gersten said. "Don't let the hectic pace of the holidays run you roughshod."

**Friends, through Thick and Thin.** Talk to a friend, or fellow party goer, about your desire to eat healthy. "You can do it, they can help," Dr. Gersten said. Enlist their aid so they won't encourage you to "just try this" or guilt you into eating "my famous cake I slaved over for days."

**Maintain Utter Consciousness.** "I grabbed a handful of chocolate chips the other day and ate them," Dr. Gersten said. "I then grabbed another handful and chowed down, and realized I was just mindlessly eating." Think about what you [eat](#). "Give yourself the five-minute rule. Stop eating for five minutes to see if you are really hungry or just bored."

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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