

Two ways to battle the holiday bulge

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Though the Thanksgiving feast and leftovers are behind you, the holiday eating season has just begun. On average, Americans gain one or two pounds this time of year. Though that might not sound like much, the annual weight gain adds up from year to year and can lead to significant gains as time goes by.

If the zipper on your favorite holiday outfit is threatening to burst and you're despairing at the incoming tide of buffets, cookie exchanges, family meals, toasts and eggnog, pick one of the following approaches to maintain your current weight and still enjoy the season.

FOOD FIGHT

This time of year, you are bombarded with food. High calorie treats appear everywhere you look. Tables are filled with home-made cookies, gingerbread, hot apple cider, Swedish meatballs and savory appetizers that are irresistible. But resist you must, says Amy Moore, Ph.D., assistant professor of nutrition and dietetics at Saint Louis University, who shares strategies to control your holiday eating.

Be picky about your splurges. You can eat crackers and cheese any time, but the holidays are a time to sample special seasonal treats that people have spent a lot of energy preparing. So, if you're at a holiday buffet, browse before you graze to size up your best options, Moore says. If Aunt Helen's delectable Christmas Buche de Noel chocolate dessert beckons, enjoy a slice but pass on the brownies or soda. Allow yourself to indulge, just choose where you want to spend your [calories](#).

Be mindful. When there's a bowl of chips right in front of you, you are more likely to keep munching without really thinking about it. So pay attention to what you're eating. Slow down and savor every bite, taking the time to appreciate what you're putting into your mouth. Watch your portion size.

Plan ahead. If you know you are going to a party in the evening, eat a healthy breakfast and lunch. Don't starve yourself; in fact, consider eating a snack to take the edge off of your hunger, Moore suggests. Bring something healthy to potlucks so at least you can count on one healthy option being offered. Fruit—pomegranates, clementine oranges and cranberries – are terrific holiday dishes because they are pretty, festive and, best of all, easy.

Conversation is calorie-free. Once you've taken a plate of food at a holiday gathering, step away from the table. Find a comfy space where you can talk to others at the party. The focus of the holiday is family, faith and friendship. Fill up on fellowship, which is calorie-free.

Water is calorie-free, too. So, drink up. Alternate a glass of water with every alcoholic beverage to pace yourself as you celebrate and prevent a next day hang-over. Consider creating a wine spritzer by adding flavored sparkling water to your wine. Instead of drinking lemonade or soda with a meal, choose water. Because drinking water fills you up, it is a favorite dieter's trick, Moore says. Water also does good things for your digestive system, skin, muscles and kidneys.

EXERCISE ATTACK

An exercise-based approach is best for those who are eating extra holiday treats in moderation and want to avoid a gradual waistline creep. Saint Louis University associate professor of physical therapy and athletic training, Ethel Frese, DPT, offers the following tips as an

approach for someone who wants to offset holiday calories by becoming more active.

Be realistic. The first piece of advice, when it comes to exercise, is a caveat. Becoming more active is a great way to mitigate a few extra calories, but it is not license to add massively to your diet. So, suppose you splurged and ate a 350 calorie pastry, on top of your normal daily calories. If you want to burn off all of the excess, you'll need nearly an hour of intense exercise. While it's not necessary to count every calorie, it is good to have a rough idea of how your [calorie intake](#) corresponds to your exercise, and know that it can take more exercise than you might think to balance out your food intake.

Everything counts. That said, don't be discouraged, Frese says. Exercise offers many overall health benefits, and burning off even an extra hundred calories a day makes a significant difference. In some cases, extra activity may be a natural part of your routine this season. Walking from the back of a packed parking lot at the mall and scouring stores for the perfect gift provides good exercise. House cleaning for company can burn calories, as can shoveling snow, playing with children and putting up decorations.

Fight the urge to hibernate. If rainy or snowy days tempt you to stay at home watching movies and reading books, be sure you don't make a habit of avoiding outings. Bundle up and get out for fresh air and exercise. Run errands, stop by to see friends and neighbors, drop off canned goods at a food pantry, check out an exhibit at a museum or build a snowman. Enjoy a few hours by the fire at home, but remember to keep moving!

Be consistent. The secret to success, Frese says, is to add a little bit of exercise each day. The effort really does add up, and you'll find that daily activity makes you feel healthier, more alert, and happier in

general. You'll enjoy the season more without the sluggish feeling brought on by too many sedentary hours. Even if you don't burn off all of the extra calories through exercise, you'll limit the damage. In January, you'll appreciate having only one pound to lose, instead of five.

The final tip from Moore and Frese? Include strategies from both approaches to maximize your benefits. Remember that the secret to controlling your weight is balancing the calories you take in (food) with the calories you burn (exercise).

"Even the healthiest eaters need to exercise and the best exercisers need nutrition," Moore says. "Nutrition and [exercise](#) provides the one-two punch of holiday weight management."

Make your weight management mantra for the season to maintain not gain. And if you stumble?

"Fortunately, we do have New Year's resolutions right around the corner," Moore says. "So if you do put on pounds during the holidays, it soon will be time to get them right off."

Provided by Saint Louis University

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