

Thanksgiving traditions that can boost health and wellness

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USC Leonard Davis School of Gerontology experts Carin Kreutzer and Leah Buturain Schneider shared Thanksgiving tips that benefit both the mind and body.

Mind: Give thanks

Gratitude is good for you. Research shows it can lower blood pressure, decrease depression and improve quality of life.

"Gratitude works," said Buturain Schneider, a gerontologist, theologian and mindful aging expert at USC.

But [gratitude](#) is not a feeling, it is a behavior we can practice every day of the year, she said.

"You can strengthen an awareness of gratitude by sharing what you are thankful for or letting people know you appreciate them. Expressing this helps build bridges, connects us to the sacrifices of others and allows us to see abundance rather than what we lack."

Serve up strong relationships

Social isolation has recently been cited as possibly being more harmful to health than smoking or obesity. Despite the headaches of travel and stress that family dynamics can bring, Thanksgiving helps build community by encouraging shared experiences with family and friends, or even welcoming strangers.

"Until age 80, most people say they want to be healthy. After 80, people say what matters most is relationships," Buturain Schneider said. "The Thanksgiving holiday is a powerful reminder of how coming together to share a meal can provide a sense of fellowship and belonging that many people, particularly older adults, are missing in their lives."

Extend a helping hand

Many homeless shelters and retirement communities are inundated with individuals who sign up to serve meals on Thanksgiving. And like gratitude, research shows that helping others can bring health benefits to the giver.

"We feel most alive when using our gifts and helping other people," Buturain Schneider said. "The challenge is to make time in our lives to do this year-round so the recipients can express their own gratitude and get support on more than just one holiday."

Body: Make lunch your largest meal

Research Increasingly shows that it is not just what we eat, but when we eat that matters. Many families eat their Thanksgiving meal in the afternoon, not in the evening, and that is a step in the right direction for all days, said dietitian Kreutzer, director of the Master of Science in Nutrition, Healthspan, and Longevity program at the USC Leonard Davis School.

"Our bodies are more efficient at burning calories during the day when we are active versus storing excess calories as fat at night while we sleep. Front-loading calories gives you time to digest all those calories well before bedtime, which can have benefits for weight loss and overall health, including controlling weight and managing and preventing diabetes and obesity."

Move after meals

From local Turkey trots to family flag football games, Thanksgiving offers annual opportunities to exercise. Along with maintaining a healthy diet, moderate daily activity is a proven intervention that can reduce risk for a variety of diseases, including heart disease, cancer, diabetes and

Alzheimer's.

"Thanksgiving is the perfect time to begin to incorporate movement into your day. A daily walk or other form of movement is good for your body and your brain."

Leave some leftovers

Some people actually prefer Friday's turkey sandwich to Thursday's main meal. Whatever your choice, it's important to spread the bounty. Practicing portion control at every meal helps ensure we don't eat too much in one sitting.

"When it comes to protein, three to four ounces is enough for most [people](#)," Kreutzer said. "Saving food for the next few days allows you to enjoy the meal multiple times and spares you from taking in too many calories at once."

Provided by University of Southern California

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