7 Tips For Staying Healthy During the “Sugar Coated” Holiday Season

By Dr. Ramona Warren

It is that time of year when we have visions of all kinds of “goodies” dancing around in our heads and most of those treats involve sugar. The NPD Group, a global information and advisory services company, reports that 50 percent of adults, out of a sample of 4,906 adults celebrating Christmas, purchase candy for the holidays and 54 percent of these sweet-snacking adults intend to eat it. Overall, candy ranks number one as the top snack item purchased for the holidays. In 2004 Americans spent $1.4 billion on Christmas candy. And we haven’t even included the amount of money spent on ingredients to bake Christmas cookies and candy. One statistic I found both startling and depressing…the average child consumes about 6,000 calories of food and candy on Christmas Day! And we wonder why our kids are bouncing off the walls during the Holiday season.

That statistic is truly depressing and speaking of depression, British psychiatric researcher, Malcolm Peet, discovered that there is a strong link between high sugar consumption and the risk of depression. Sugar can cause “brain damage” by causing your brain to shrink as well as creating inflammation throughout both the brain and body. Many people already feel lonely and depressed during this time of year and we certainly don’t want to add to the risk of increasing depression by consuming sugar. However, studies show that sugar is more addictive than cocaine because of the way it affects the brain chemicals and causes you to crave it just like you would a drug. All of us know that cocaine is addictive and detrimental to our health. However, what most of us are not aware of is the damaging affects sugar and the Holiday “goodies” have on our health.

Here are some simple steps you can take to reduce the consumption of sweets during the Holidays:

1. **Eat Breakfast-** start your day with a good quality protein breakfast. This will help keep your blood sugar more balanced and reduce your cravings. If you don’t already start your day with a healthy protein based breakfast then this is a good time to start.
2. **Have a plan-** As it is said, if you don’t have a plan, you are planning to fail. Beginning your day with a plan is another good way to start your day. Look at what is ahead on your agenda and if you are going to be in a situation that day where you will be tempted by the foods you typically avoid, then come up with a strategy of how to make healthier choices.
3. **Go for protein-** At holiday parties choose the proteins and vegetables over the sweets. This will give you more energy and, again, reduce your sugar cravings. Use the plan you came up with at the beginning of the day (step 2) and decide ahead of time *what* you are going to eat and *how much* you will eat.
4. **Exercise-** Continue your exercise routines during the Holidays and if you don’t have one, then get started now, even if you only exercise for 5 minutes at a time. This is such a busy time of the year and we get caught up with the excuse that we can’t find time. Many studies show that you only need 20-30 minutes of quality exercise a day to make a positive difference in your health and you still derive benefits when it is divided into shorter periods of time. So, find just 5 minutes four times a day to improve your health.
5. **The Buddy system-** We were taught as children that we should share with others and this is a perfect time to follow that principle. Share your dessert with someone else. That way you can enjoy the pleasure without all the guilt. Also, when you are at a Holiday dinner or party, find out if there is someone there that shares your desire to make healthy choices and help keep each other on track. There is power in numbers and it is always good to have an accountability partner when keeping the number of sweets to a minimum.
6. **Bring your own dish-** When you are invited to a party, you can volunteer to bring a dish that you have prepared that you know is a healthier option, whether it is a side dish or a dessert. For example, you could bring a nutritious green salad and fill your plate with mainly salad and less of the calorie laden side dishes. If you bring a dessert, make one that is a healthier version by using quality substitutes. There is a cookbook that we carry in the office, “Paleo Comfort Foods” that has some dessert recipes that are both healthy and good. For example, the Apple Crisp recipe would be great for a Holiday dessert.
7. **BYOB-** Bring your own bottle and “drink up”. Of course, the bottle you bring should be filled with water. That sounds pretty boring, but it is effective. Most people are dehydrated and drinking water helps reduce hunger and increase your metabolism. You will also find that if you are around all those sweets and ready to give in to the temptation, if you will drink a glass of water you will find it will strengthen your resolve. Plus the fact that there is usually much more alcohol consumed during Holiday dinners and parties. When we increase alcohol consumption, not only is the alcohol converted into sugar, but our ability to avoid the sweets is weakened. You could also bring a bottle of “sparkling” water and add it to your wine. That way you can enjoy your wine and drink less.

**Keep your focus on your health by following these 7 steps and have a blessed Holiday season.**