**6 Simple Steps to Avoid Holiday Weight Gain**

**By Dr. Ramona Warren**

Once again, the holidays are nearly upon us. It's the time of year full of joy and “JUNK.”  It would be fair to say that, of the nearly 200 pounds of sugar consumed annually by the average American, a majority of it is eaten from Halloween until Christmas.  Not only are we surrounded by incredible sweets and home baked goodies, but rich dinners, cocktail hours and social gatherings tend to feature prominently this time of year.  Research shows the average adult gains anywhere from seven to 12 pounds between Thanksgiving and Christmas.  While weight gain can seem unavoidable over the holidays, the good news is that by making a few simple lifestyle changes, it is possible to avoid the dreaded holiday weight gain.

**1.  DRINK WATER** Water is our body’s most important nutrient, and we should drink adequate amounts every day of the year. Drinking water helps improve our metabolism, helps us lose weight and keeps us from feeling hungry. Oftentimes when we experience hunger pains, our bodies are actually dehydrated and are sending a signal to drink water. Drink a minimum of 64 ounces each day.  Other liquids such as coffee, tea, soda or milk do NOT count toward this total. Drinking a glass of water before each meal, or before leaving for your holiday party, can help decrease your hunger and increase your ability to lose weight. Many celebrities and models are very aware of how simply drinking adequate amounts of water can help keep their weight under control.

**2. BE THOUGHTFUL**Mentally prepare yourself. Actually think about what you will allow yourself to eat, have a plan in mind and focus on healthier choices. Imagine yourself at dinner or at your party, and know what you will permit yourself to eat at that meal. If you are not sure what is going to be served, then plan to eat one protein, one carb and a lot of veggies.  It is okay to choose to have a splurge, but limit that splurge to a single dessert. Just because the food is there doesn’t mean we have to eat everything.  Much of the time we mindlessly consume food, which packs on the pounds. When we stop and focus on what we are putting in our mouths and become more aware, then we can make healthier choices and avoid ingesting unnecessary calories.

**3. SET YOUR LIMITS**Limit yourself to a single plate of food.  The average number of calories consumed during a Thanksgiving meal is 7,100!  So, stick to your healthy choices and savor them. Eat slowly, taking the time to chew your food at least 20 times before swallowing. Not only will this help you digest your food better, but you will get full faster and spare yourself a lot of extra calories.

**4. GET MOVING**Most of us know there are going to be special treats around during the holidays that we are going to indulge in. So, accept the fact that you are going to indulge a bit, enjoy it and then get moving. Do some extra exercise each day to help burn off those extra calories. Add 15 minutes here or 10 minutes there throughout the day. It still adds up even if the exercise is for short durations. Also, doing resistance exercises a few times a week will help build your muscles. One of the many benefits to developing more muscle mass is that  increases your metabolism since muscle tissue burns more calories than fat tissue.

**5. EAT EARLY**There is a saying that states, “Eat breakfast like a king, lunch like a prince and dinner like a pauper.” When we eat a good healthy breakfast to start the day, it helps keep us from having cravings and “crashes” later in the day. Eating a good lunch, and then a light dinner, will help keep the pounds off. If possible, enjoy your holiday meals before 7 p.m. Foods eaten earlier in the day will be burned off better. When we eat later at night, the food is more likely to be stored as fat. If your dinner or party is scheduled for later in the evening, then plan on having a healthy light snack an hour or two before you leave so you won’t eat as much at dinner. Having some lower-carb foods like raw vegetables, salads, lean protein or chicken broth will help curb your appetite and reduce your desire to indulge.

**6. EVERYTHING IN MODERATION**You might not want to give up any of your traditional holiday treats. If that is the case, then allow yourself to indulge, but limit yourself to a single bite. Share your treat with someone else so you aren’t tempted to eat the rest. Follow the 80/20 rule -- when you do things well 80 percent of the time, then you can have some splurges 20 percent  of the time. Unfortunately, most of us have this backwards and only follow healthy habits 20 percent of the time and over indulge 80 percent of the time, especially during the holidays.

This year, follow these simple steps to keep the weight off, and give yourself the gift of good health.

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