

## A sensible, modern approach to holiday meals

With simple strategies, holiday meals can be approached with confidence and a sense of control... bringing the joy back to holiday gatherings.

The strategies include:

- The holiday meal "game plan"
- Flexible food selection
- Polite assertiveness
- A simple holiday exercise plan
- A holiday food philosophy
- Positive self-coaching

### The Holiday Meal Game Plan

Holiday visits and holiday meals are fairly predictable. Think ahead. Some meals should be light, for example, a simple breakfast before a more extensive meal later in the day. Also, for the "big" meals, plan to take smaller amounts initially -- don't "pile it on" your plate. And, talk! Talking slows down your eating and you'll eat less. (Conversation gives time for your hunger center in your brain to tell you you've had enough.)

## When serious food concerns develop

Many people have mild concerns about how they look, weight, and personal dietary issues.

However, at times more serious concerns develop. For problems with any of the following, consultation with a counseling or health professional is recommended:

- Intense preoccupation with food and body size
- Frequent avoidance of meals
- Attempts to reduce calories ingested by use of laxatives, vomiting, etc.
- Guilt and depression over eating and weight gain
- Intense anxiety regarding "forbidden foods"
- Frequent overeating of any food type
- Prolonged, very intensive exercise along with the concerns listed above
- Low self-esteem or self-confidence because of body weight

## Counseling Services

**Washington State University Spokane**  
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# Food and the Holidays



## Holiday Feasts and Personal Angst: An Historical Note

American and other cultures emphasize food and feasts at holidays.

For our ancestors, feasts represented special times of the year to celebrate and enjoy foods and delicacies, prepared in quantity.

For much of the year, foods were expensive, out of season (and therefore unavailable), or laborious to grow or to obtain by hunting or fishing.

Sweets were especially rare, since ingredients were scarce and everything was made by hand, at home.

Work of all kinds was hard and mostly physical, and weight control was less of an issue than maintaining a healthy weight -- especially in cold climates with harsh winters.

Back then, feasts were looked forward to -- it was a luxury to eat as much as one wanted, to offset the lean times in the year when there was little or no food available.

However, these days, food of all kinds is inexpensive and widely available and the idea of feasting -- consuming large amounts of food -- can cause anxiety and dismay, rather than joyous anticipation.

## Flexible food selection

Consider that there are no "forbidden foods." On a brief holiday visit, it's OK to eat any foods offered, including sweets. Forbidding or denying certain foods may lead to preoccupation, guilt -- and overeating. Try to sample modest amounts of a variety of foods.

## Polite Assertiveness

Encouragements to "have some more" can be experienced as stressful social pressure to overeat. Before the holiday, think ahead and develop some polite replies. For example, "Thank you, it's delicious, I really don't need any more." Smile! Say it a second time -- or a third (Grandma will be OK) and always with a smile. If really pressed, accept "just a little more." This is usually satisfactory to the insistent friend or relative.

## The Holiday Exercise Plan

Most people overeat at least once during a holiday period. It's hard not to. However, simply walking for an hour or so will burn off 1/3 to 1/2 of the calories from a big meal. Take opportunities to walk during the holiday --in the morning, on a shopping trip to the mall, or even after a meal. Studies now show that simple walking burns calories quite efficiently and has the added benefit of improving mood and attitude. For maximum benefit, walk longer distances (1 hr walking is better than 30 minutes).

## A holiday food philosophy

Health professionals now recommend sensible consumption of food -- with variety, moderation, and balance -- along with an active lifestyle, involving moderate exercise, throughout the year. One can control one's eating during holidays, but even eating a bit more and gaining a pound or two during a holiday is not disastrous. Resuming a moderate diet and exercise program after a holiday will allow one's body to readjust, and an added holiday pound will be burned off within a week or so. The key is to develop a year-round plan for balanced diet and exercise and stick to it. Simply walking frequently each week will help. Consider consulting a health professional to develop a personalized, 12-month diet and exercise plan.

## Positive self-coaching

It's easy, with the stress of holidays and the large amounts of food available, to feel anxious or guilty or down on oneself regarding weight, eating behaviors, body image etc. Be alert for thinking negative things about yourself, and challenge those thoughts! Rather than berating yourself for that extra piece pie you ate, tell yourself it's OK, you're still a good worthwhile person, and you'll burn off half the calories on your walk tomorrow. Remind yourself that occasional excesses don't matter and that your plan for holiday food coping is reasonable and effective.