

Keeping Thanksgiving healthy: Nutritionists serve up some tips

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To paraphrase Gordon Gekko: “Green is good” for healthy Thanksgiving menus, so consider green beans with almonds. (Getty Images/iStockphoto/bhofack2)

Back in the good old days, a major part of staying “healthy” meant getting to the gym. Then 2020 happened.

Now, staying “healthy” is synonymous with staying home.

And in keeping with this submarine fire of a year, just doing that is getting more difficult: The holidays are upon us. That means — for yours truly, at least — the powerful temptation of single-handedly destroying a sweet potato pie in one sitting.

Yes, elastic waistbands help us delay consequences, but there has never been a more important time to make healthy choices than the 2020 holiday season.

Because the healthier we are, the better our chances of weathering a serious illness like you-know-what.

“If you have the opportunity to work on your health and wellness, lower your [body mass index], decrease your risk of [being] overweight or obesity, you’re in a much better place,” said Allison Farrow, a registered dietitian for CoreLife/Adventist HealthCare. “And you can definitely increase the odds that you’ll fight off COVID-19 more successfully.”

It helps, too, with mental health, “which is also really important this time of year as we head into the winter months,” she said.

Here are some tips to help you minimize Turkey Day regret.

Yes to exercising

“A lot of us are not getting as many steps as we used to,” said Lisa Muras, a registered dietitian and certified diabetes educator at Virginia Hospital Center. “We’re not walking to the Metro. We’re not — maybe in many cases — going to the grocery store. So we’re a lot more sedentary.”

It’s high time to change that. You’ll probably need to lose some pounds once it’s time to dig out the old wardrobe, so you might as well get in the habit now.

Get outside and jump-start that metabolism with a turkey trot or a long stretch of socially-distanced activity — while wearing that mask, of course.

Or, if you've got an elliptical or exercise bike, burn some calories while you watch [the only Thanksgiving sporting event that matters](#).

No to fasting

Starving yourself for hours before the big meal usually means you'll start binging once the prayer is over. The result: a blood sugar spike, a food coma and/or something medical experts call "acute tummy ache."

Instead, Farrow suggests eating on as normal a schedule as possible, with lots of protein and vegetables before you dive into all those fats and carbs.

Vegetables vegetables vegetables

Did we mention vegetables? "I mean, I know it sounds cliché coming from a dietitian, but that really is just one way to make your plate healthier," Muras said.

If the meal isn't for a few hours, snack on veggies. Then when it's meal time, start with ... more veggies.

"Try to make most of your plate some type of salad or green vegetable, perhaps an orange or red vegetable to get some different types of vitamins in there," Muras said, "and then, of course, enjoy some of those fattier side dishes but maybe in smaller portions."

Which brings us to the next tip ...

Dessert plates for dinner!

OK — calm down, you weirdos. It's not what you think. Those smaller plates, Farrow said, are a helpful way to control your portions of taters 'n' gravy, bird and such.

Minor adjustments to the classics

- **Turkey:** Opt for white meat. "You're saving a ton of fat by doing that," Farrow said. " ... That's like a no-brainer."
- **Mashed potatoes:** Use a lower-fat or skim milk for the mashed potatoes: "You still get the same result, but much less fat," she said.
- **Sweet potatoes:** Be smart about what you add to them. Instead of brown sugar and marshmallows, Muras suggests topping them with sliced apples. Farrow suggests baking them with some olive oil and cinnamon.
- **Stuffing:** Go with a whole-grain option instead of refined-flour-rich breadcrumbs. Think wild rice, chestnuts, herbs, etc.

Choose your battles and strategize

Farrow suggests being selective about what you really want to enjoy. In other words, savor that piece of pecan pie you've had your eye on. "But look at the rest of the meal and try to think to yourself, 'Do I really need that roll with dinner?'"

"It's all a give and take," she said.

'Aim to maintain'

Be sensible about your goals, too. Losing weight during the holidays is a noble one, but c'mon now.

If you set the bar too high, you're more likely to fail — then fall into a shame-eating spiral.

In Farrow's words: "Aim to maintain, and you're less likely to gain."

"I know a lot of folks will continue to lose weight, and I think that's wonderful," she said. "And if they lose weight, even better. However, I feel like just being realistic going into a holiday weekend."

So set modest, realistic goals. And don't make the holiday just about food. Instead, focus on the connections we can still make during this terrible crisis. Oodles of homemade noodles won't get us through this horrible pandemic. Our loved ones will, whether it's through a Zoom chat, a phone call or a conversation held at 6-plus feet.

All that said, don't even look at that sweet potato pie. It's got my name on it.