

Keep your health habits on track during the holidays

Put the focus on friends, family, and fun, instead of food.



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It's November, time for Thanksgiving and the start of the holiday season, which is also known as the time of year when healthy habits slide off track and waistbands get tighter.

"The truth is, people do tend to abandon healthy habits during the winter," says Dr. Beth Frates, clinical assistant professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation at Harvard Medical School. Blame the cold weather that keeps you inside and makes you feel sluggish, or the parade of holiday parties. Who wants to stick to a diet or trudge to the gym?

While many people who indulge a little too much during the holiday season are able to refocus in January, others never regain the fitness ground they've lost or drop the pounds they've added. But it doesn't have to be this way. If you're committed to maintaining your health goals, there are some simple strategies that can help keep you moving in the right direction through the holidays and beyond, says Dr. Frates.

Change your focus. The holiday season is a wonderful time to work on cultivating quality connections with family, friends, and colleagues. Instead of seeing it as a series of parties where you can indulge in food and drink, focus instead on improving relationships and making memories.

"It's not as much about filling your stomach with fine food as it is about filling your heart with the love of those around you," says Dr. Frates.

Partake (in moderation). Focusing on maintaining your health goals doesn't have to mean going without any indulgences; it just means setting some limits.

"If you do drink alcohol, stick to the American Heart Association guidelines," says Dr. Frates. This means no more than one drink per day for women. "When you have too

many beverages, you lose track of your drive to fuel your body with nutritious and delicious food," says Frates.

Don't pause workouts. "Everyone gets busy during the holidays, and often, the first thing to go is their workout plan. This is what NOT to do," says Dr. Fatima Cody Stanford, assistant professor of medicine and pediatrics at Harvard Medical School.

"A regular workout schedule of at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity will not only help relieve stress, it will lead to better weight regulation during a time when calorie-dense foods are the norm."

Try a new activity. A fun, new workout can inspire you to get moving when the cold weather hits. Options include both indoor and outdoor activities. If you are a tennis player, try to find an indoor space where you can continue to play during the winter months, says Dr. Frates. If you're a walker, head to the mall to do some laps. The holidays are a great time to experiment, whether it's trying a Zumba class or swimming laps in an indoor pool. Gyms and clubs often offer deals during the holidays, so take advantage.

Enlist your friends and family. Take the opportunity to connect socially and boost your fitness by trying a class with a friend or family member. Exercise is always more fun if it doubles as a social activity.

Gear up for activity. Putting together your own wish list for the holidays? Add some fitness items — maybe a set of hand weights or a portable minicycle that you can use while you sit at your desk or watch television at night. Or ask for a cooking class so you can learn how to make some healthy meals.

Proper winter clothing can make it possible for you to enjoy the cold weather without feeling the chill.

"As the old New England saying goes, there's no such thing as bad weather, there's just inappropriate clothing," says Frates.

Track your habits. Food logs, activity trackers, fitness watches, or even a simple calendar are good ways to keep tabs on how often you are exercising. Tracking your daily progress can make you more conscious of your health habits and alert you when you're starting to slide.

Skip the shame. If you go off track during the holiday season, don't give up.

"If you do have a day that doesn't go as planned and you revel and have excessive fun, use it as an opportunity to learn and grow, set a new goal, and move forward," says Dr. Frates.

Waving the white flag in defeat will just make it harder for you to get back on track when the New Year rolls around.

Food and drinks at small holiday gatherings during COVID-19

Currently, there is no evidence to suggest that handling food or eating is associated with directly spreading COVID-19. It is possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object, including food, food packaging, or utensils that have the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes. However, this is not thought to be the main way that the virus is spread. Remember, it is always important to follow [food safety practices](#) to reduce the risk of illness from common foodborne germs.

- Encourage guests to bring food and drinks for themselves and for members of their own household only; avoid potluck-style gatherings.
- Wear a mask while preparing food for or serving food to others who don't live in your household.
- All attendees should have a plan for where to [store their mask](#) while eating and drinking. Keep it in a dry, breathable bag (like a paper or mesh fabric bag) to keep it clean between uses.
- Limit people going in and out of the areas where food is being prepared or handled, such as in the kitchen or around the grill, if possible.
- Have one person who is wearing a mask serve all the food so that multiple people are not handling the serving utensils.
- Use single-use options or identify one person to serve sharable items, like salad dressings, food containers, plates and utensils, and condiments.
- Make sure everyone [washes their hands](#) with soap and water for 20 seconds before and after preparing, serving, and eating food and after taking trash out. Use [hand sanitizer](#) that contains at least 60% alcohol if soap and water are not available.
- Designate a space for guests to wash hands after handling or eating food.
- Limit crowding in areas where food is served by having one person dispense food individually to plates, always keeping a minimum of a 6-foot distance from the person whom they are serving. Avoid crowded buffet and drink stations.
- Change and launder linen items (e.g., seating covers, tablecloths, linen napkins) immediately following the event.
- Offer no-touch trash cans for guests to easily throw away food items.
- Wash dishes in the dishwasher or with hot soapy water immediately following the gathering.