

The holiday season can be a dieter's worst nightmare. Tempting treats and schedules filled with tasks and events can quickly take a successful wellness plan off track. Parties and shopping combined with baking and planning make heading to the gym difficult.

Selecting the healthiest items on the holiday buffet can be challenging when so many other seemingly more delicious and less nutritious choices are on the table.

Members of TOPS Club, Inc. (Take Off Pounds Sensibly), the nonprofit weight-loss support organization, know that making conscious food choices, practicing portion control, and managing fitness goals are key to maintaining a healthy lifestyle. But what happens when the temptation gets to be too much?

"As the holiday season quickly approaches, it is important to plan healthy eating strategies to prevent weight gain," according to Dena McDowell, M.S., R.D., C.D., nutritional expert for TOPS. "Every day we are faced with obstacles that could derail a weight-loss plan."

"But planning in advance can help one stay on track," McDowell said. Consider these holiday scenarios and their solutions to enjoy a healthful holiday season.

Shopping Gone Awry

After shopping all afternoon, you realize that you missed lunch and are now ravenously hungry. You figure that eating at the food court won't hurt since you've been walking throughout the mall.

"What you didn't realize is that certain food choices can sabotage your exercise efforts," McDowell says. "Don't let hunger win. Instead, plan ahead and pack some healthy snacks in your purse such as almonds, a piece of fruit, or a high-fiber granola bar."

She advises snacking on healthy, low-fat, high-fiber foods to help stave off hunger and make the French fries or dessert not look as appealing. “Remember to pack a water bottle to drink throughout the day,” she adds.

The Office Holiday Party

“Work parties offer many opportunities to make poor food choices as they often are buffet-style meals with unlimited dessert choices,” McDowell says. “Couple large portions with alcoholic beverages and you may have a calorie nightmare on your hands.”

Planning properly can help to make holiday work functions a good networking tool instead of a nutrition nightmare, according to McDowell.

“Eat a light snack before leaving for the party such as an apple and a glass of water. Then, once at the party, use a small plate and look for foods that are not fried or oily-looking,” she says. “Aim to fill your plate with lots of fruits and vegetables to decrease the overall calorie content. Limit alcohol and balance each beverage with a glass of water.”

Fun Family Gatherings

“When families get together, food choices are plentiful and those favorite recipes are not only delicious but also comforting,” McDowell notes.

She suggests preventing overeating at family gatherings by planning in advance to spend more time socializing and less time at the counter.

“Offer to do kitchen clean up instead of going back for second helpings,” McDowell adds. “Washing dishes will help prevent going back for more food while allowing for extra calorie-burning potential with this task.”

Consider these additional TOPS tips for making your holidays healthful:

- Set food and beverage limits for yourself in advance.
- Order a glass of low-calorie juice or water.
- Grab a small-sized plate for your meal.
- Load your plate with vegetables and fruit.
- Eat smaller portions of the meats and starches.
- Choose a piece of hard candy or gum to prevent snacking on high-calorie treats.
- Ask for non-fat milk or sugar-free sweeteners in hot beverages.
- Allow seasonal drinks for times of celebration or just once a week.
- Skip the free samples when out shopping. While they may seem insignificant, calories can add up if multiple snacks are eaten during the day.

“Remember that food is only one part of holiday gatherings,” McDowell adds. “Make the meal a secondary aspect of the celebration. Spending quality time with family and friends is more important – and rewarding.”

