Busting the Top 5 Excuses to Overindulge During the Holidays--Strategies to Cope with Holiday Eating

By Becky Hand, Licensed & Registered Dietitian

Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house, everyone was eating...even the mouse!

The most wonderful time of the year is back, and that means one thing: notorious holiday parties! Between the office buffet, neighborhood open house, family gatherings, religious festivities, and community get-togethers, sticking to a healthy eating plan becomes, well, difficult to say the least.

The reason? Simple. Tempting, high fat, calorie-laden dishes are the common denominator of almost every holiday celebration. And excuses for overindulgence are as easy to find as holiday cheer.

Check out the following excuses. If any of them sounds familiar, don’t worry. SparkPeople has the strategies to help you deal with these excuses, and still enjoy the holiday season.

Excuse #1: The food looks and tastes so good! How can I resist?
It’s true—there will be plenty of terrific foods. But will you feel good after you eat them? Imagine yourself overindulging. How do you feel afterwards? Was the taste really worth it? Could you have received the same pleasure with a smaller amount?

Excuse #2: It’s a special occasion. It only comes once a year.
The holidays only come once a year, but the parties, events, and gifts of food never seem to end! Stop and decide which ones are really worth the splurge. When it is time for the splurge, bank calories from earlier in the day.

Excuse #3: Everyone else is eating. The hostess will be offended.
Just because everyone is eating does not mean that you have to eat everything too. Choosing smaller portions shouldn’t offend anyone. Remember, “If you half-it, you can have it.” And sometimes it may be necessary to “just say no”.

Excuse #4: I should offer desserts to the company in my home.
Keeping your favorite desserts at home usually spells trouble. When treats are in the house, more of the dessert usually ends up in you, rather than your guests. Therefore, keep some low fat, low-calorie alternatives on hand. Check out SparkPeople’s Dessert Recipes for ideas. Make a trip to your local library and flip through the healthy holiday cooking magazines and books for other creative alternatives.

Excuse #5: I'll get back to my healthy eating plan tomorrow.
This thinking is okay, as long as it is realistic. Make sure an occasional splurge does NOT become a repeated excuse (or turn into “next week” or “next month”).

Putting It All Together…
The best defense against holiday eating disasters is a combination of both planning and strategy.

1. Take inventory. Identify all the situations that make it difficult for you to eat healthy during the holiday season. Is it office parties, food courts at the shopping mall, family gatherings, extra baking and cooking at home?

2. Plan a system of attack. For example:

   Bring a low calorie appetizer to the office party.
   Don’t go shopping on an empty stomach.
   Use healthier substitutions and make a low-calorie, low-fat dessert for the family gathering.
   Budget calories throughout the day, so you can afford to spend a few more at the party.
   Burn extra calories in a longer-than-usual exercise session.
   Some research shows that adding just 10 more minutes of intense exercise to your usual workout can stave off holiday weight gain.
   Stay focused by getting 7-8 hours of sleep nightly.

3. Remember to reward. Making it through the holidays can be hard work. Establish a reward system to stay motivated along the way. Deposit a pre-determined amount of money (the amount should be based on what you can financially afford) in a jar every week that you are able to follow your healthy eating plan. Then after the holidays—when the sales are big—go out and buy something special just for you!

4. Stay positive. Everyone makes mistakes, so there will be times when even the most disciplined person will slip. Don’t worry or stress during these mishaps—it is critical to get back on track. Staying positive is half the battle.

Remember, armed with a good plan and a positive attitude... You will be nestled all snug in your bed, while visions of carrot sticks (and low-calorie dip) dance in your head.
Stress, depression and the holidays: Tips for coping

Stress and depression can ruin your holidays and hurt your health. Being realistic, planning ahead and seeking support can help ward off stress and depression.

By Mayo Clinic staff

The holiday season often brings unwelcome guests — stress and depression. And it's no wonder. The holidays present a dizzying array of demands — parties, shopping, baking, cleaning and entertaining, to name just a few.

But with some practical tips, you can minimize the stress that accompanies the holidays. You may even end up enjoying the holidays more than you thought you would.

Tips to prevent holiday stress and depression

When stress is at its peak, it's hard to stop and regroup. Try to prevent stress and depression in the first place, especially if the holidays have taken an emotional toll on you in the past.

1. **Acknowledge your feelings.** If someone close to you has recently died or you can't be with loved ones, realize that it's normal to feel sadness and grief. It's OK to take time to cry or express your feelings. You can't force yourself to be happy just because it's the holiday season.

2. **Reach out.** If you feel lonely or isolated, seek out community, religious or other social events. They can offer support and companionship. Volunteering your time to help others also is a good way to lift your spirits and broaden your friendships.

3. **Be realistic.** The holidays don't have to be perfect or just like last year. As families change and grow, traditions and rituals often change as well. Choose a few to hold on to, and be open to creating new ones. For example, if your adult children can't come to your house, find new ways to celebrate together, such as sharing pictures, emails or videos.

4. **Set aside differences.** Try to accept family members and friends as they are, even if they don't live up to all of your expectations. Set aside grievances until a more appropriate time for discussion. And be understanding if others get upset or distressed when something goes awry. Chances are they're feeling the effects of holiday stress and depression, too.

5. **Stick to a budget.** Before you go gift and food shopping, decide how much money you can afford to spend. Then stick to your budget. Don't try to buy happiness with an avalanche of gifts. Try these alternatives: Donate to a charity in someone's name, give homemade gifts or start a family gift exchange.

6. **Plan ahead.** Set aside specific days for shopping, baking, visiting friends and other activities. Plan your menus and then make your shopping list. That'll help prevent last-minute scrambling to buy forgotten ingredients. And make sure to line up help for party prep and cleanup.

7. **Learn to say no.** Saying yes when you should say no can leave you feeling resentful and overwhelmed. Friends and colleagues will understand if you can't participate in every project or activity. If it's not possible to say no when your boss asks you to work overtime, try to remove something else from your agenda to make up for the lost time.

8. **Don't abandon healthy habits.** Don't let the holidays become a free-for-all. Overindulgence only adds to your stress and guilt. Have a healthy snack before holiday parties so that you don't go overboard on sweets, cheese or drinks. Continue to get plenty of sleep and physical activity.

9. **Take a breather.** Make some time for yourself. Spending just 15 minutes alone, without distractions, may refresh you enough to handle everything you need to do. Take a walk at night and stargaze. Listen to soothing music. Find something that reduces stress by clearing your mind, slowing your breathing and restoring inner calm.

10. **Seek professional help if you need it.** Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself feeling persistently sad or anxious, plagued by physical complaints, unable to sleep, irritable and hopeless, and unable to face routine chores. If these feelings last for a while, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional.
You may need to change your skincare routine with the weather—in addition to diet and exercise changes; the change of seasons can affect your skin. Individuals with normal to oily skin in the summer may experience very dry skin in colder weather—learn how your skin behaves and adjust your routine accordingly.

Take the following extra steps toward having healthy skin:

Protect yourself from the sun with clothing, hats and sunscreen.

Eat fewer greasy, fast foods and more fruits, nuts and whole grains.

Get enough sleep.

If you’re a smoker, try to quit.

These small changes can make lasting differences in your skin’s appearance and overall health.

Recipe of the Month: Green Bean Casserole

Transform this kid-favorite into something everyone can enjoy by replacing packaged and canned ingredients with fresher, healthier alternatives. This recipe is the perfect side for holiday meals.

In a medium saucepan, sauté onion in cooking oil. Add flour and cook 1 minute. Gradually add milk, stirring until blended. Stir in cheese, sour cream, sugar and salt; cook for 5 minutes or until thickened and bubbly, stirring constantly. Put green beans in a baking dish; pour the sauce over the top. In another bowl, pour the melted margarine over the stuffing mix; stir well and sprinkle over green bean mixture. Bake at 350 degrees for 20 to 25 minutes or until heated through.

Yield: 8 servings. Each serving provides 106 calories, 5g total fat, 2g saturated fat, 5g protein and 186 mg sodium.

4 Tips for Fighting the Flu

Flu season is here, and taking the following four simple steps to protect yourself is important.

1. **Get a flu vaccine**—The earlier you receive your vaccine, the less likely you are to get the flu. If you are allergic to eggs, however, you should skip the flu vaccine, as it is made with eggs.

2. **Keep your hands clean**—Wash your hands even more frequently and keep anti-bacterial hand sanitizer handy.

3. **Improve your diet**—Eating fresh fruits and vegetables that are rich in nutrients will strengthen your immune system.

4. **Exercise more**—Immune function increases with exercise, as do energy levels.