



Keeping Your Family (And Yourself) Healthy During The Holidays

A Fact Sheet Prepared for the
Council on Contemporary Families

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If you are a typical American, you consumed 3,000 calories at the Thanksgiving dinner table, and another 1,500 nibbling and snacking throughout the day. Exercise physiologists say that the average 160-pound person would need to run for four hours, walk 30 miles, or swim for five hours to burn those calories!

The rest of the weekend probably wasn't a lot better, what with all the leftovers. And the Thanksgiving Day feeding frenzy is just the kick-off event for the five-week season of holiday eating and drinking that follows.

It's not only the body (and the waistline) that suffer during holiday season. Emotional health also may be threatened by the stress of preparing a family feast, traveling, shopping (especially during these financially difficult stressful times), or dealing with long-simmering family tensions and the pressure to create the "perfect" occasion.

Keeping healthy during the holiday season isn't something we need to do alone, however. Decades of research by social scientists show that good relationships keep us healthy. Spouses, partners, and friends can help us to eat and sleep well, motivate us to exercise, and provide emotional support during stressful times. Here are ten tips to keep yourself (and your families) healthy throughout the holiday season.

1. **Exercise Together** . It's hard enough to exercise regularly during the year, never mind during the hectic holiday season. Families can pre-schedule a 30 minute exercise time for each day of the holiday break. Taking an early morning jog or a leisurely walk after dinner is more fun when you do it together.
2. **Say When, When It Comes to Food**. The average person gains a pound over the holidays, which may not sound like much, but can really add up over the years. Choose your favorite holiday treats and then agree to limit the amount of other tempting foods you keep in the house. Skip fat-laden appetizers and serve veggies with salsa or hummus. Indulge sweet tooth with apple slices and dates. Use smaller plates and you're guaranteed to eat smaller portions. Start your meal with water, soup, or salad to "fill up" before the big-calorie courses. You and your partner can discuss how much to eat, and then help each other resist the extra serving. Remember to nudge, not nag.
3. **Drink in Moderation**. Decide in advance how many drinks you'll have, tell your partner or a friend, and then vow to stick to this. Give each other license to say "you've had enough." Again, remember to nudge, not nag. (If you or your partner cannot resist the temptation to drink, however, consider seeking professional help). Hosts should be sure to have a selection of sparkling waters and interesting juices and lemonades. Serve

water flavored with orange or cucumber slices instead of or alongside alcoholic drinks.

4. **Keep a Regular Bed Time.** Irregular sleep is one of the biggest taxes on good health over the holidays. Partners can decide before the party the best time to leave and “precommit” to it -- including appointing one of you to keep track of time and make sure you leave the holiday party at a set hour. It’s easier to say “sorry, we have to leave,” or “I know she’d love to stay, but she has an appointment in the morning” if you’ve made a plan ahead of time and one person is appointed to keep track.
5. **Split the Driving.** Holidays often involve long drives to family and friends. Icy roads, traffic, and sheer exhaustion all increase the chances of a car accident. Partners can divide up the driving, to ensure that the passenger can rest and recover while the driver focuses keenly on the road. Make sure someone other than the driver answers the cell phone!
6. **Find Couple Time.** Even the best relationship can suffer when you are surrounded by energetic children, nagging in-laws, and annoying distant cousins. Take an hour away from the family festivities to take a nap, go for a walk, have a quiet conversation, or make love.
7. **Sneak Away for Alone Time.** Everyone needs time alone to breathe. If the family closeness gets to be too much, just take a break. Your partner can “cover” for you by hanging out with the others while you slip away, or taking them somewhere else so you can have a breather. Partners can discuss, before the family gathering, how they can support the other taking a quick get-a-way.
8. **Share The Burden.** Women often shoulder the burden of the holidays, doing everything from baking, shopping, wrapping gifts, and sending holiday cards to organizing everyone’s travel schedule. Make a list of tasks and then divide them among family members, including children. If everyone has a task, this takes the load off of Mom and makes the holiday a real family affair.
9. **Have Realistic Expectations.** Movies about heartwarming holiday celebrations and TV ads showing couples swapping the perfect gifts are fiction. Think realistically about what your family really is, what you can afford, and what holidays have been like in the past. Keeping expectations in line with reality helps keep everyone happy.
10. **Rethink Gift-Giving.** The pressure to buy gifts for everyone in the family can be distressing, especially for those who have lost their jobs, cut back on work hours, or struggle to meet high monthly bills. Think about doing “secret Santa,” where each family member draws a name from a hat, and then buys a gift for just that person. Consider making home-made gifts, whether a photo collage, a CD of one’s favorite tunes, or a “coupon book” where the gift giver provides the recipient with services ranging from backrubs to a night of free babysitting. Those who can afford to give gifts might consider making donations to a meaningful charity, in honor of a family member. The positive feeling that comes from altruistic gestures is good for our mental and physical well-being.

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About CCF

The Council on Contemporary Families is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to providing the press and public with the latest research and best-practice findings about American families. Our members include demographers, economists, family therapists, historians, political scientists, psychologists, social workers, sociologists, as well as other family social scientists and practitioners.

Founded in 1996 and now based in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Miami, the Council's mission is to enhance the national understanding of how and why contemporary families are changing, what needs and challenges they face, and how these needs can best be met. To fulfill that mission, the Council holds annual conferences, open to the public, and issues periodic briefing papers and fact sheets.

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