Journey through Thyme

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Columnist

Healthy holiday eats

It's easy to get swept up in the holiday season. By eating just 200 extra calories a day — a piece of pecan pie and a cup of eggnog here, a couple pumpkin pancakes and some butter cookies there — you could pack on a couple of pounds by the New Year.

According to recent research published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* it takes an average of five months to lose that extra weight.

It is possible to eat healthy during the holidays. A little planning can help you get through the holidays without adding unwanted pounds.

Bake your holiday cookies, cupcakes and other breads with the usual recipe — but reduce the sugar that the instructions call for by a half to a third, and use unsweetened applesauce, which is fat-free, instead of butter or oil. Boost the flavor with cinnamon, nutmeg and pumpkin pie spice.

Don't go to a holiday party when you're ravenous. Before going to a party where there will be plenty of food, drink lots of water or snack on fruit, nuts or a salad so you won't devour sugary and fatty or high-calorie holiday offerings. And when you're at the party, try not to hang out near the buffet table.

It may seem unlikely, but high-quality dark chocolate with a high cocoa content is actually nutritious. It doesn't have the fat or calories of milk chocolate, which contains butter and added sugar. Also, it offers high amounts of iron, magnesium and copper, plus is a rich source of antioxidants.

Mix raw almonds, dried apples, whole dried cranberries, dark chocolate chunks and raw English walnuts into a bowl for a heart-healthy snack.

Kathleen Zelman, a registered dietitian based in Atlanta, Georgia said, "Any time you can incorporate healthy ingredients, like fruit or whole grains, you can essentially make your snacks and desserts count toward your healthy diet."

Instead of piling your plate a mile high with things that don't tantalize your taste buds, pick only the foods that give you true enjoyment. If something doesn't really catch your fancy, leave it on the sideline.

Holiday party spreads may offer plenty of dips and chips, but one way to fill up and feel satisfied when faced with all those endless little unhealthy bites is to make protein one of your plate's primary features.

In the morning, before any holiday parties begin, whip yourself up a morning entrée that contains about 20 grams of lean protein, as well as a whole grain, a fresh fruit or vegetable, and a dose of healthy fats, such as a spinach omelet with avocado, it will work together to keep you full until your next meal — and help you steer clear of the Christmas cookie tray.

Alcohol increases your appetite and diminishes your ability to control what you eat. On average most adults consume almost 100 calories a day from alcoholic beverages. Since avoiding alcohol altogether may be hard during this time of merriment, alternating between a cocktail and a zero-calorie sparkler can help you avoid pouring on the pounds.

Although holiday activities are typically focused on food and drinks, try catching up with friends or family without being tempted, suggest going on a hike, heading to a yoga class, or catching a movie instead. You'll still get some quality time with them, which is what the holidays are all about.

Pumpkin Chocolate Chip Cookies

Packed with hearty oats and cinnamon, these wholesome pumpkin chocolate chip cookies are the perfect way to recharge from a long week of holiday shopping.

- 3/4 cup quick oats
- 1/2 cup oat flour — or you can finely blend oats until they turn into flour, then measure out 1/2 cup of the finely blended oats
- 1/4 cup sugar of choice or xylitol
- 3 Tbsp. mini chocolate chips
- 1/4 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/4 teaspoon pumpkin pie spice
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/3 cup canned pumpkin
- 1-2 tablespoon milk of choice, as needed
- 1- 1/2 Tbsp. oil or nut butter of choice
- 1/2 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

Preheat oven to 350ºF. Combine all dry ingredients in a large mixing bowl. Add wet ingredients (soften nut butter to a stir-able consistency first), and stir to form a batter. Add a little extra milk of choice only if needed. Form balls, then place on a cookie tray and flatten a little. (A good way to flatten cookies is to place a sheet of wax paper on the cookie, then press down with the bottom of a glass.) Bake 10 minutes, then let cool an additional 10 minutes, during which time they will firm up. You could also make up the dough balls ahead of time and freeze them for a rainy day!