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UT Southwestern dietitian gives advice on fighting holiday pounds

DALLAS – Dec. 12, 2005 – Our promises to eat less during the holidays seem to disappear when we're faced with parties and family gatherings laden with high-calorie food and drinks. Year's end can also bring out the worst in our eating habits, but a UT Southwestern Medical Center dietitian says breaking those habits can be easier than you think.

Lona Sandon, assistant professor of nutrition at UT Southwestern, says there are some simple tricks everyone can use to keep from getting stuffed this season.

"On average, we gain one to two pounds over the holidays, but unfortunately, we often don't lose that weight," she said. "So over the course of 10 years, you can find yourself 20 pounds heavier and losing the weight can be quite difficult."

If you're hosting holiday parties, she suggests setting a table featuring lots of high-fiber, high-water foods such as a big green salad and fresh vegetable tray. This will encourage you and your guests to start the meal with a low-calorie appetizer.

You can also provide lower-calorie dressings, such as light vinaigrette or dips that are made with light sour cream or low-fat cream cheese. Crispy appetizers like pickles, fresh vegetables and fruit can also help guests consume fewer calories at the buffet table.

"I also recommend using smaller sized cocktail plates or even cocktail napkins instead of large plates," Ms. Sandon said. "That discourages guests from piling food onto their plates. When you're serving casserole dishes, serve from a tablespoon rather than a giant serving spoon. People are more likely to serve themselves less food."

Using pre-sized portions also keeps people from sampling large portions of the main entrée or dessert. Cutting a pie into slices prior to setting it out on the buffet table keeps guests from cutting larger portions.

Ms. Sandon also recommends limiting food choices. "Make two appetizer platters instead of four and limit desserts to one choice," she said.

For guests attending parties, Ms. Sandon recommends eating something before you go so you don't arrive ravenous. This can help you from getting into the tempting treats. Decline the nut-covered cheese balls and high-fat cold cuts and start with fresh fruits, vegetables, small portions of nuts and lean

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cuts of meat such as turkey breast.

During the holidays, people also tend to give and receive food. To keep the pounds away, Ms. Sandon said rather than giving a box of chocolates, choose one or two gourmet or specialty chocolates and a nice card. For those who receive gifts such as pre-wrapped sausage and cheese baskets, she suggests donating them if you want to avoid temptation.

“Wrapped foods and candies that you don’t want to eat you can consider taking to a food bank,” Ms. Sandon said. “They would be more than happy to have it and you wouldn’t have it in your house tempting you to indulge.”

With New Years right around the corner, Ms. Sandon also suggests people to stay away from drinks that can quickly pile on calories and maybe even lead you to eat more.

“When we start talking alcohol, calories can add up very quickly, especially in mixed drinks with fruits and sugars added,” she said. “Simpler beverages like wine have between 120 and 150 calories per glass, which isn’t too bad compared to a margarita which may have up to 400 calories.”

She said consuming alcohol can make you feel hungrier, so it’s a good idea to politely decline a cocktail until you’ve eaten. Another alternative is to drink club soda or diet soda. Holiday drinks such as eggnog are very high in calories and fat, so drink those in moderation, or better yet, avoid them altogether.

Lastly, Ms. Sandon says that not every holiday gathering needs to be centered on food.

“You can plan a party that doesn’t include dinner, or plan a gathering at your house at a later hour after your guests have eaten dinner,” she said. “You might want to offer fruit and some nice specialty cheese that people can sample.”

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