

HOLIDAY EXCESS

James H. Carraway, M.D.
Eastern Virginia Medical School

In this country and around the world, there are too many people in the category of being either overweight or obese. Today we have an extraordinary array of food choices available to us, so many of which are not healthy but are very tempting. Additionally, we all “overeate” during the holiday season, and this has become an accepted thing to do.

As those of you know, the proper diet balance is about 30% protein, 30% fat, and 40% “complex” carbohydrates at every meal and snack. Unfortunately, this is not the pathway that most of us choose, and this is probably why the majority of people in this country eventually become overweight. Our excesses often begin at breakfast time when we eat a sugar-based cereal or a bagel, sometimes with butter, jam, or cream cheese. This type of breakfast does not provide good nutrients and is not in good balance. Once your insulin is stimulated from these food choices, during the remainder of the day high calorie foods are eaten to keep the insulin cycle running. This increases desire for pastries or other high calorie foods during the day to reduce the hunger that comes from the increased insulin levels. The best choice at breakfast and lunch would be to consume food from the three food groups to maintain insulin balance. We also feel obligated to make sure that once a food item is opened, we finish it all. None of us wants to waste food, so we eat until the container is empty, even though it is not wise to add those extra calories to an already full intake of excess calories. A better choice is to use smaller packages of snacks so that we will not eat more than we need.

Going out to dinner is a problem, because restaurant portions are usually too large, leaving us with the choice of either wasting food, taking it home with us, or eating that last portion even when we are already full. Of course, eating out may mean having a large portion of fries on the side, and often dessert is felt to be obligatory to finish the meal. Then there are holiday meals, such as Thanksgiving Day, where we actually spend the day preparing large amounts of food and then eating it. Who has not been too full after eating the appetizers, dinner, and desserts included in the day’s festivities? Who has not gone back for a night snack after consuming a large number of calories during the day with the regular meal? I think we all have been guilty of this, even though we know that we should not add more calories to an already heavy caloric overload.

In addition to the daily opportunities for overeating, we all are exposed to holiday parties and special holiday treats offered to us, and it is hard to deny oneself these nice offerings. Someone is always bringing cakes or cookies or other types of sweets to the office, and it is hard to avoid having at least a “sample” of these items.

The food supply in this country is bountiful, but works against us almost as much as it works for us. We know that being overweight increases the chances for cancer, diabetes, heart disease, arthritis, and most other diseases. The combination of too many calories,

too little exercise, and too much unhealthy fat raises the potential for these nutrition-based illnesses.

With so much unhealthy food in our daily intake, so many calories available which taste good, and a great number of food choices available to us during these two months of the holiday season, it is difficult to eat a healthy diet. Because it is so difficult, hardly anyone does it. But there are ways to improve your diet if you plan for it. Some people think about what they're going to eat at a party and already know where to reduce their intake and keep it at a moderate level. By eating the healthier choices first, balancing it with a little protein, then finishing up with the "goodies," one can achieve a better balance. Otherwise, the weight gain that is so common for people during the holidays is unavoidable. No one else can make the choices for you, but if you plan in advance, you can make good decisions at the holiday table.

Paying attention to what to serve for meals and cocktail parties or what to eat at these occasions is very important. In general, trying to be your healthiest every day in terms of your food intake means shunning empty calories, which are usually carbohydrates. Pastries, breads, cakes, and cookies are all examples of foods which have a high glycemic index and stimulate your insulin abnormally in addition to adding calories. A carbohydrate calorie actually stores faster as fat than either protein or pure fat. Most of the time on table presentations there are vegetables, nuts, olives, and other snacks such as cheese dips, etc. Sticking to things that have nutritional value, things that stay in the guidelines of balance of the three food groups intake at every snack and every meal, will help reduce the amount of weight you could possibly gain. Remember that alcoholic beverages are 100-150 calories each. Red wine has less sugar than white wine, and if you add 10 to 20 glasses over the holidays, even that makes a difference. Additionally, sometimes we go to cocktail parties and don't end up eating. Think of your cocktail party presentation as a meal and see what the best is that you could make of it. A little bit of protein, a little bit of good carbs, and a little bit of fat. This will hold you until your next meal and will keep you from gaining weight as well. Now, sometimes you just have to have a bite of that cookie or cake or the crab dip with crackers. In that case, go ahead and indulge yourself, but keep a little mental list about how often you are going outside of the loop to eat. In doing this you will eat your healthiest over the holidays.

A good rule for nutrition is to steadfastly eat some of the three food groups each meal and snack. Good carbohydrates are not sugar and good fat is not hydrogenated fat. Making food choices based on better nutrients along with a good balance will keep you healthy for the holidays and will keep you from gaining too many extra pounds. As we all know, however, restricting our food choices is the hardest thing that we have to do, and it applies to all of us. Think of the bad food choices as a kind of slow-acting poison which undermines your health and adds undesirable extra pounds, and this may help you choose a better diet. Enjoy the holidays in a healthy way!