

How to Avoid the Traditional Holiday Weight Gain

By Robert B. Crenshaw, NSCA-CPT.

The average weight gain for Americans between Thanksgiving and New Years Day is between 7 to 10 pounds. With the increase in holiday parties and abundance of holiday treats coupled with the reduction of natural sunlight, it may seem hard to keep a physically active lifestyle and continue to eat healthy. People also approach the extra parties in a way that actually harms them more than helping them. This article will discuss the typical choices that people make that hinder their weight control efforts. Then it will illuminate ways for individuals to approach the holiday season in a manner that will help keep the weight gain off as well as even help you lose some extra body fat. With these tips, you will have momentum going into the New Year that will kick start your year on a good step.

With the approach of the holiday season, a few things happen. First, the time of natural daylight is reduced daily. Second, people tend to host more parties, bring in more food to the office and increase their consumption of sweets. Third, schedules seem to fill up more than any other time of year. The combination of these three occurrences reduces most people's activity levels, increases their caloric consumption and increases their stress levels. When this happens, the body turns into a fat storing machine instead of a fat burning machine.

People are well aware of the traditional gain during the holidays. This is no secret to anyone. Even though everyone seems to know that this happens, they still make choices that lend to the fat gain. First, people don't get out in the sunlight as much. Yes, it is colder and most people are at work when the sun is out and that makes it harder. Although daylight does not directly correlate to weight loss or gain, it has other benefits that help improve health. The increase in Vitamin D is a major one. What the reduced amount of sunlight does affect is people's activity levels. When there is more sun, people tend to get outside and do more. When it gets dark before people return from work, they tend to stay inside without physical activity. On top of that, the clouds just seem to hang around making the days grey. We use the sunlight to help produce serotonin and with the shorter days and more cloud cover we have less ability to produce serotonin. Our body uses serotonin to help keep our moods up. According to Wikipedia, the function of serotonin in the central nervous system is believed to play an important role as a neurotransmitter in the regulation of anger, aggression, body temperature, mood, sleep, and appetite. Eat foods such as mushrooms, fruits, and vegetables especially foods such as bananas, pineapples, plums, turkey and milk that contain tryptophan to increase your level of serotonin. Tryptophan is used by your body to produce serotonin. This will help you sleep better giving you more energy during the day and allowing your body to recover and process the food from the previous day which in turn will decrease the amount of fat your body stores.

Second, there is an increase in parties with more food, more food brought into the office and an increase in sweets. Even those that have great eating habits during the

year are tempted by the onslaught of food and end up consuming more calories than normal. Everyone, again, knows this and they try to make choices to reduce their caloric intake. They will skip eating throughout the day so that they can overeat at the party. Their metabolism slows down during the starvation part of the day causing the body to store whatever it can as fat while breaking down muscle tissue to provide energy for the body to function. Then, when the body is in this state of storing, they eat a lot of food in one sitting. On days that there isn't a party, there are sweets set out all day long tempting people to eat them. These treats are usually high in carbohydrates and sugars causing high levels of insulin to be produced by the body. Insulin holds the keys to unlock the doors to the fat storage closets.

Third, because of all the parties, travelling to see family, school concerts, final exams, or year end projects, the schedule gets overwhelmed making it harder to fit in time for physical activities as well as eating correctly. This increases stress levels, reduces sleep times, and again, takes away time for working out. Again, this lends to more fat production and less lean body mass. Add in the extra calories that most people take in and you get the magic potion for weight gain.

WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT IT?

Below is a list of habits people do during the holiday season that lend to unwanted weight gain and ways to avoid these choices. Following these simple suggestions will allow you to enjoy the holidays with friends and family without the guilt and without the weight gain.

FALSE HABIT #1: *I will skip breakfast and lunch so I can eat a lot at dinner/party and still be under my calorie limit.*

Suggestion – Skipping meals is not a good choice. This lowers your metabolism and causes your body to go into starvation mode. The body needs energy so in starvation mode the body will store what it can as fat and then break down muscle for energy. This also causes you to be extra hungry when you do get to the dinner/party so you tend to load up on the sweets and carbs the body is craving first. This onslaught of carbs causes a huge spike in insulin opening the fat storage cells. Also, because you have starved yourself most of the day, you are more likely to overeat. Eat breakfast, lunch and a few snacks to keep your hormone levels even throughout the day and you will be less hungry for dinner.

FALSE HABIT #2: *I need to get back for seconds before anyone else does to get more of the good stuff.*

Suggestion - Although this may be true and if you don't get right back up, you may miss out on the extra helping of marshmallow yams. Even though you may not feel full at the time, you probably have eaten enough for your body to digest and use. Since most of the dishes made for the holidays are mostly carbohydrates, the body response system to being full isn't shut off as soon. The body will send a signal to the

brain saying it is no longer hungry when you eat proteins sooner than when you eat carbohydrates. If you wait until everyone else gets seconds, two things will happen. First, usually most of the sweets and carb laden foods will be gone and the protein rich turkey will be left allowing you to keep your insulin levels down. Second, the body will have time to send the “full” signal to the brain and you may not even feel like getting seconds. Then you can enjoy the great pumpkin pie with less guilt.

FALSE HABIT #3: *I will eat a huge meal and then take a nap and sleep it off.*

Suggestion – Ah yes! The wonderful nap after eating the nap-inducing turkey... How can you not take part of this tradition! With all the running around in preparation for the dinner, the rest time after is usually a welcome event. As I stated earlier, most holiday meals are predominately carbohydrates. It would be better to go for a walk or keep moving around right after eating to use as much as that energy as you can. Then, take your long awaited nap. Granted, the weather may not be the best for walking outdoors, but there are numerous options you can do to be active after the meal. Cleaning up can be everyone’s job and you can get in a lot of walking by taking one thing at a time to the kitchen. There are plenty of 24 hour fitness facilities (Like Snap Fitness) that allow you access at anytime and you can take a quick stroll on one of the treadmills.

FALSE HABIT #4: *I have to eat this, my aunt/grandma/brother made it.*

Suggestion – Just because a loved one made something doesn’t mean that you have to eat it. There is an episode of NBC’s Friends where Rachel is in charge of the dessert. She makes an English Truffle but didn’t realize the pages were stuck together so ended up making half a truffle and half Sheppard’s pie. Her friends knew that she had made the mistake but instead of telling her that they didn’t want to eat the combination of meat and banana crème, they lied to her as they each hid their desserts around the apartment so they wouldn’t hurt her feelings. One of my clients knows that going to her in-laws means nothing but sweets and fat laden food so she is making her own dishes to pass. And to get over the awkwardness of bringing more food, she is going to tell them that she just had to try this new recipe and figured it would be nice to bring some for everyone.

So, does this mean that you should avoid parties? No! But planning ahead will help you keep your metabolism up as well as give you the freedom to have that piece of pie your aunt made just for you. Start planning the week before. Plan your meals out for the week to make sure you are getting the right amount of calories, protein, carbohydrates, and fats in your diet. Then on the day of the big feast, stick to your normal diet (which should include breakfast, a healthy snack, lunch, and another snack just before the party) and then use the meal at the party as your “cheat” meal for the week. After the first plate, give yourself 20 minutes before heading back for more. This way, the signal your stomach has sent to your brain saying it is full will actually get there before you try stuffing in more food. Also, plan a rigorous exercise sometime during the day. Get out and play in that family football game or go for a

brisk walk. It has been shown that weight training will keep your metabolism revving for longer period of time after the workout than just cardio exercising. So if you can get to the gym, then by all means plan when you will go and then go. If you are so busy throughout the whole week that you are unable to plan time during at least 3 days a week to exercise, there are plenty of things to do during your daily life that won't add extra amount of time and will increase the amount of calories you burn throughout the day. Anytime you can increase the amount you move, you increase the amount of calories you are burning. Instead of sitting in your car in the drive through at the bank, pharmacy, or (I don't even want to say it...) fast food restaurant park your car, get out and walk into the building. Not only will you get the added benefit from walking, you also get a lift from the face to face contact. And when you do park your car, don't sit and wait for the closest space to open up. Park in the first one you see, or the farthest one there is to also increase the amount you walk. At the office, you can stand while on the phone to burn more calories than just sitting. On your bathroom breaks, take the stairs to the ones on the floor above or below you. At home, you can exaggerate the movements when cleaning to increase the caloric burn. If you have younger children, use them as weights as you do squats and shoulder presses or chest presses if you are lying down. The increased physical contact will help build your bond as well as burn more calories.

Even though you get a vacation day from work on the holidays, try to keep on schedule with your nutrition and exercise programs. Eat early, eat often, keep proteins and carbohydrates even as possible and move. As one of my former clients stated; "Put down the food and get off the couch." If you can get through the holidays and maintain your weight and muscle mass, consider yourself ahead of the game. With my simple tips listed above, you should have no problem doing just that and may even shed a few pounds of fat. Make it a great holiday season!

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